

## A Morbid Taste for Ice

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## A Morbid Taste for Ice

by [sitehound](#)

### Summary

Darcy Lewis likes to think of herself as terribly adaptable, with an "if life gives you lemons, zap life with a Taser and demand chocolate" sort of attitude. And life, lately, has had a perverse sense of humor, first trapping her in a state of perpetual Science Assistant in the armpit of New Mexico known as Puente Antiguo; and then forcing her to live in a trailer home with Jane Foster, Jane's guy, Thor, and his brother, Loki, master of mischief and wide-scale urban renewal.

But Darcy's not about to let her situation get her down. She's managed to get pretty good at her job, and with liberal application of a credit card, made her rustic house a home. And wielding a Taser and armored by her snarky wit, she's more than a match for the God of Mischief.

Stumbling face-first over the frozen body of a friend on the front porch, however, is more than even mostly unflappable Darcy can handle. The obvious suspect is her mentally unstable roommate. But despite all his other faults, Darcy is certain Loki isn't the perpetrator. And not just because she's starting for fall for him....

### Notes

This began as a bit of drabble, driven by my annoyance with the not-very-authentic New Mexican town of Puente Antiguo. (Seriously. It doesn't look like any NM town I've ever seen.) I played around, adding "local" flavor. And then it started to acquire a plot and turned into a murder mystery.

Trigger warnings: discussion of rape; rape flashback (not graphic); depression; PTSD; angst.



# Chapter 1

## CHAPTER ONE

On a typical August day in the New Mexican desert, when the sun scalded the earth with a merciless heat that reflected back off every surface, making it feel all the more like hell, Darcy Lewis was swathed in a thick sweater, and still shivering.

It was the day before the first frozen dead guy showed up on the front porch and things got really weird, as opposed to the big slice of comic-book strange that her life had become over the past year.

She pulled the sweater down over her hands and shot an angry glance at the thermostat on the wall, which was currently set to 95, and yet the room's vents continued to emit a flood of icy refrigerated air. Needing a live target for her ire, she glared daggers at the man across the room, who stood with Jane before a white board, the two fiddling with a long equation. The borked thermostat was probably his fault. He wasn't supposed to do magic, but she wouldn't put it past the bastard.

Darcy and her three companions were in a laboratory in SHIELD's newest facility, located in sunny New Mexico, just a few miles outside of Puente Antiguo, the perfect out-of-the-way location, because nobody really cared what happened in New Mexico. After all, when a giant robot marched through the dusty little town like a shiny metallic Godzilla, the incident hadn't merited more than fifteen seconds on the local news' broadcasts, and a short article in the *Albuquerque Journal*, titled, "Puente Antiguo Residents Battle Insurance Companies Following Meteor Shower."

SHIELD had soaked several million tax dollars into the new complex--state-of-the-art everything, security, electronics--but they still couldn't find a competent HVAC technician. "If this keeps up, we'll be able to keep penguins in here," she said, expecting no response from anyone in the room and getting none.

Darcy leaned back in her chair, which was new and extra comfy, and removed her glasses, rubbing her eyes. On the upside, her job as research assistant had grown up and gone beyond glorified gopher and procurer of coffee. Recently, she'd developed some wicked database "skillz." Though a big part of her duties included mindless data entry, she'd started doing data retrieval and was getting good, better than Jane, at constructing complex queries. Hello, job satisfaction.

The downside was being stuck in a freezing laboratory for several hours a day with her boss's superhero boyfriend and his crazier than a deer-at-a-hunters'-convention brother. "This place must be violating all kinds of federal workplace regulations," she muttered, casting another load of stink eye at the Jane's partner in "sciencey" stuff.

Although, at the moment, the sane brother was the one bringing on the irritating. As she proved herself more useful with actual research-related matters, Thor picked up the menial chores once given to Darcy. It wasn't like he had much else to do.

Every two weeks or so, he'd go off on a short assignment for SHIELD. The need to haul Loki everywhere he went, however, put a damper on quality time with the Avengers, whose super powers didn't include super forgiveness. Darcy put her glasses back on and smirked, imagining Loki in a room with the Avengers. Oh, to be a fly on *that* wall.

Fresh out of copy jobs, and with a new pot of coffee brewing on the counter a few feet away, Thor happily whiled away the time playing Angry Birds on Jane's iPad. With the volume turned up as

high as possible. Triumphant cheers erupted from the birds, echoed by Thor's, as he finished another round. "Three stars!" he said.

Jane, Darcy and Loki stared at an oblivious Thor. "Is there a reason for your incessant attraction to that irritating mortal toy?" asked Loki.

Thor grinned. "The birds, brother! They are angry and must be avenged!"

Jane smiled indulgently at her guy, and Darcy thought, *"Counting down to 'You're not my brother' in five, four, three, two-"*

"You're not my brother," said Loki through a clenched jaw, turning back to the white board and erasing a line of equations with an angry swipe.

Darcy open her email and sent a quick message. Getting a response a minute later, she scooped her purse from under the desk and stood. "I'm going to the break room. Anyone want anything? Snacks? The missing cards in your deck?" The last comment was directed at Loki, but as usual he ignored her. If ignoring people was an Olympic sport, he'd be covered in medals.

The door to the Fish Bowl--her name for the mostly glass-walled lab--chimed as she opened it and Max Padilla, the guard stationed on the hallway, lifted his chin at the sound. "Hey, Max," she said, heading toward him and the nearby lift.

Max was outfitted in SHIELD's black body armor, a Desert Eagle pistol, his only apparent weapon, at his hip. Like all the guards, he had all manner of ways to bring the pain secreted in his uniform and could do a fair amount of damage with his fists alone. When he saw Darcy, he smiled, good humor shining in his dark brown eyes.

"How's life in the Fish Bowl?" he asked as she waited for the lift.

"Our water needs changing, and somebody should harpoon the shark."

Max tapped the firearm at his side. "As soon as I get the order, sweetheart, one bullet in the brain." Like many SHIELD employees, he'd lost friends to Loki's genocidal hijinks, and only a strict sense of duty kept him from disobeying orders and attempting bloody revenge on the God of Mischief.

She humored Max with a smile. While she admired the sentiment, even now in a slightly domesticated state, Loki wasn't the kind of monster you put down with a gun. The lift took her to the top floor, though "top" was a misnomer, since it was still a couple hundred feet underground. On the surface, the property was a feedlot, with real cattle, and all that entailed including manure and piss and flies.

Floor One was where everything that didn't require guns and/or laboratories lived: the administration offices, medical clinic and break room. Though the facility was built to accommodate about 200 employees, at the present it operated with about 50, many of whom were often off-site. The break room was really a small cafeteria, but with the current skeleton crew, the kitchen wasn't in operation, so food came via several vending machines.

Sean was already there, sitting at a table; his office in accounting was just down the hall. He smiled a quiet close-mouthed smile when he saw her and she felt a spark that shot up her back and bounced down to her toes. Together they went to the vending machines, where Sean bought a turkey sandwich and Darcy got three Snicker's bars.

Only three other people were in the room, a guard sitting alone, and two women. Darcy couldn't remember the guard's name, but the women were lab assistants from Floor Four. Nine months ago,

when she, Jane and Erik moved into the Fish Bowl, Sarah and Cammie had been friendly. In fact, Darcy and Jane had spent off-work time with the two women; had gone to the movies; even driven down to Santa Fe for a couple of shopping trips.

Then Thor popped back to Earth, his wayward, city-destroying brother in tow, begging SHIELD for a kind of asylum. SHIELD took him in because no way were they going to let go of a prize like Thor, or for that matter Loki, not when other secretive branches of the government, or other countries' covert ops, would be equally happy to possess a couple of Norse gods.

And now Sarah and Cammie, along with every other SHIELD employee behaved as though Jane and Darcy had rolled in a pile of cow shit up in the stockyard. Sean at least, was still her friend, even though he would no longer visit her in the Fish Bowl.

"Three candy bars? That bad, huh?" said Sean.

Darcy grinned. "No, it really isn't. I mean, no worse than usual. The other two are for Jane and Thor." Maybe she should have gotten two for Thor. Chocolate might distract him from Angry Birds. Of course a god on a sugar high could be an even bigger problem.

Sean smiled absently, his attention on unwrapping his sandwich. He was a man of few words, which suited Darcy just fine. She didn't hang around Sean for his scintillating conversation. Sean O'Malley was the prettiest man she'd ever seen, and, hey, she lived with two gods.

Individually, his features weren't attractive. His face had a rawboned quality with prominent cheekbones, and an almost too-strong jaw line. He wore his brown hair in a shaggy disheveled cut. His lips were full and sensual, and with his lanky boyish frame, he had a vaguely androgynous cast. But his most striking features were his big blue eyes--cornflower blue, as Jane called them. Darcy had never seen a cornflower, but figured it must be breathtaking if Sean's eyes were any indication. Collectively, all his features added up to someone who should be strutting down a fashion runway.

Most of the women in the building, and some of the men, were in love with Sean, but Darcy was the only person to get anywhere with him, although "anywhere" wasn't far. They'd had dinner twice in Puente Antiguo's crappy little diner, and once, dinner and a movie in Santa Fe. He'd held her hand a few times, but so far, hadn't even tried for a kiss. He wasn't giving her a gay vibe and she had pretty good Gaydar; never mentioned religion, so probably wasn't saving it for marriage; so that left super-shy virgin. Darcy grinned to herself. The idea of deflowering a beautiful man definitely had its appeal.

"You seem pretty chipper," observed Sean. "Did you get good news, like...your roommates are moving out?"

"Naw, honestly? I think I'm getting used to them."

His eyes widened. "Really? You're getting used to living with a mass murderer?"

She shrugged. "He's mostly harmless, now."

"Harmless?" he said in an incredulous tone, his blue eyes blazing with a strange ferocity.

Darcy flushed. "Okay. Not harmless." She peeled back the candy wrapper and took a small bite, chewed and swallowed. "More like 'housebroken,'" she said, hoping to placate him. The filter between her brain and mouth rarely worked, and normally she was impervious to other people's reactions, but Sean was one of her few remaining friends at work.

Sean nodded, the intensity dropping from his gaze, returning to his usual mild demeanor. They ate their lunch, the conversation unmemorable, largely because Darcy's brain was occupied with images of herself tangled in his long, lanky limbs.

On the way out of the cafeteria, she broke down and bought another Snickers bar for Thor.

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Since the arrival of the boys from Asgard, leaving work had become a minor ordeal requiring armed guards and a security escort to-and-from the trailer in the desert that they called home. Actually, even something as simple as going to the ladies' room or the cafeteria was supposed to involve a guard, but in Darcy's case, that complication was regularly disregarded. There were perks to being the least respected member of Team Astrophysics.

Frankly, Darcy was just glad that the powers that be, i.e., Director Nick Fury, had let them continue living in the trailer, rather than moving them to quarters at the facility. If she had to live underground, day-in, day-out, she'd probably go as crazy as Loki and start contemplating world domination alongside him.

To make the trip out of the Fish Bowl and up the lift, they were accompanied by four assault rifle-toting guards. Again, given Loki's track record, Darcy wondered how much good the rifles would do. Her Taser--which wasn't allowed on the facility--at least had been proven effective against one out of two Norse gods. (Unfortunately, though she was dying to try it on Thor's not-brother, the jerk had thus far been disappointingly benign.)

The lift opened to a receiving room in an ugly, two storey ranch house. The room, once the living room and kitchen, had been modified and looked like the screening area at an airport. They passed through the multiple scanners--Darcy wondered if all this zapping was giving her cancer--and left through a side door to the parking lot. Thor and Jane led the way, followed by Loki and then Darcy.

Loki, however, stopped in the doorway, head canted skyward, and she almost crashed into his leather clad back. Thor was back to dressing like a Midgard lumberjack, plaid shirt, jeans and work boots, but Loki refused to blend. Instead of his villainous green, black and gold, he wore an outfit of black leather, with a few metal flourishes, and no helm. Rather than the straight-from-a-comic-book shoulder length mane, his ebony hair was cut just an inch below his ears. Though more subdued, he still looked like a cosplayer in search of a con.

Darcy put a hand on his back and pushed. "Move it, Mad Science."

"Don't touch me," he said, though without his usual venom.

"I'm making dinner tonight. Be nice or I'll spit in your food." She shoved with both hands and he moved.

As she stepped outside, her gaze rose to the sky. It had rained while they'd been underground--recently, by the smell of wet sagebrush--the remaining clouds brushed across clear blue sky like smears of damp white paint. A rainbow arched across the sky, its translucent double just below it. The sun, dropping to the western horizon, edged the clouds with gold. It was still hot as hell, now with the unusual complication of humidity, so she peeled off the bulky sweater, revealing a

seasonally appropriate short-sleeve red top.

They climbed into Jane's newish SUV--paid for by SHIELD--Jane driving with Thor riding shotgun, Darcy and Loki in the backseat. Once, Thor had sat with Loki, but lately Darcy had ceded her position, letting the two lovebirds ride together. Besides, she found she enjoyed goading Loki into verbal skirmishes.

For the most part, Darcy was the only person that the belligerently taciturn god would acknowledge. Though coldly pleasant to Jane when discussing matters of physics and magic, which Darcy now knew were essentially one and the same, he otherwise confined his communication to icy glares and angry grunts.

Darcy had a gift for bringing him out of his stony silence, though their conversations were light years from civil. At first Jane and Thor had tried to mediate. Thor would plead, "Brother, she is our hostess, please show her the respect due." (Loki, naturally, would growl his mantra: "You're not my brother.")

Jane would frown worriedly and chide Darcy, "Please don't antagonize him." As of late, however, the couple seemed to have given up.

After one particularly vociferous snipe fest, ignored by Jane and Thor, Darcy had turned to Loki and said, "Mom and Dad don't care if we kill each other anymore."

With a suggestion of dark amusement, Loki had responded, "Perhaps they hope we will."

Today, she didn't feel up to sparring with her partner in carpool hell, so she stared out the window at the gorgeous New Mexico sky as the SUV left the lot, past corrals filled with sad-eyed cattle on the next-to-last leg of the journey to becoming steaks and burgers. It had been six months since Thor and Loki moved in with Jane and Darcy (Erik moving out almost immediately--who could blame him?).

As Darcy understood it--and she understood so little--following Loki's latest misadventure, Odin was having a merry old time reeducating his prodigal not-son. Odin's "reeducation" involved no textbooks, but loads of sharp toys, blood and Loki screaming like a girl. Justice, old-school Norse-style sounded like a wonderful idea to Darcy and probably everyone in the known universe except for Thor.

One night Thor took it upon himself to liberate Loki from prison, a task that was suspiciously easy. It turned out Odin had foreseen his eldest son's betrayal and cast a spell on Loki. Anyone who took the God of Mischief from the prison would be bound magically to him. Thor had to remain within a hundred feet of Loki; if he moved beyond that distance, Loki would suffer excruciating convulsions, and eventually die in slow agony. (Darcy, of course, had repeatedly begged Thor for a demonstration of this but so far Thor--the killjoy--had refused.)

Thor had thrown himself and his brother on SHIELD's mercy, explaining that Odin would make no attempt to retrieve his sons if a Midgard entity took them under its protection. Somewhere along the line, Fury decided that the best place to dump the two would be in Nowheresville, New Mexico, with Thor's mortal love interest. SHIELD had recently set Jane up with a brand new, three bedroom, two bath, house trailer; she had plenty of room, right?

No one bothered to consult her other two roommates. Darcy had considered following Erik to New York, but he begged her to stay and keep an eye on Jane. So here she was, sitting next to the guy who had single-handedly revitalized the construction industry in New York City with just a few hours of homicidal mayhem.

Her stomach growled, reminding her of the extra candy bar in her purse. She had bought it with the good intention of giving it to Thor, but changed her mind. He had superpowers; she didn't *and* she had to sit in the back with Loki. She deserved chocolate.

The wrapper would not open and she shot Loki a hard look. "Stop it!"

He smirked and wiggled a finger and wrapper tore abruptly, the candy almost falling from her hands. "You lose, Mad Science, I never drop chocolate." She started to take a bite and then, on a bizarre impulse, broke off a third, and handed it to him. He dropped his emerald gaze to her hand, expressionless. "I slept too late this morning. Didn't get to ride my bike. I don't need the calories," she explained.

She expected he'd sneer and turn away, but he surprised her and plucked the chocolate from her grasp, nimbly avoid contact with her fingers.

In the front seat, Thor and Jane were discussing Chihuahua dogs and other toy breeds. "Truly? They are descended from wolves?" asked Thor, incredulous.

Darcy eyed Loki warily for a moment, but all he did was eat the candy. She followed suit, because, well...chocolate, though there was a risk when dealing with anything Loki tampered with. Like the time all her whites came out of the laundry a vile shade of green. Or the enchanted hair conditioner that turned her hair purple. That prank had been a failure on his part. The shade looked divine on Darcy and as an added bonus, she now knew for certain that Thor sometimes used her conditioner.

After a few moments, she asked, "So why the fascination with the clouds back there?"

He ignored her, lifted a finger to his mouth and licked away a spot of chocolate. She turned to look out the window, glancing back to see the ubiquitous shiny black SUV that followed them everywhere.

"The sky reminds me of Asgard," he said, startling her out of her thoughts.

"You mean because it's beautiful?"

"Yes." His frigid mask had fallen away, and he suddenly looked terribly young. Darcy gulped, unsettled. His demeanor was so out of character, her first impulse was to say, "Who are you and what did you do with Loki?" But nothing came from her mouth. Then, just as quickly, it passed and he retreated behind the familiar sullen wall.

"So do they run in packs, these miniaturized wolves?" Thor asked Jane.

In the rearview mirror, Darcy could see Jane's eyes sparkle with wry mirth. "Yes," said Jane, "huge packs of a hundred or more. Because they're so tiny." Thor stared at her in amazement before realizing she was joking and then roaring with laughter.

Loki's shoulders rose in a sigh and Darcy giggled and said under her breath, "Yeah, you're right. There's no way you two are brothers." His gaze met hers for an instant, fey humor in his green eyes, before he quickly turned away.

Unnerved by the odd bits of humanity that Loki had let escape, Darcy sat in silence, thinking. Then she licked her lips, lifted her hand, index finger pointed toward him and pressed her fingertip against his shoulder where small plates of metal gave way to leather.

"Don't touch me," he snarled, lip curled in disgust, shrinking from contact.



"There's the Loki we know and hate," said Darcy with a grin.

"Loki, enough," grumbled Thor; "Darcy, leave him alone," said Jane.

Darcy laughed. "And Mom and Dad love us after all."

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Jane turned the SUV onto Don Tenorio Road and Darcy leaned against the door, watching the black SUV follow and thinking, *This is what it's like to be president of the United States, followed everywhere by an armed detail.*

Except the president's detail was there to protect him or her. This one pulled double duty, protecting Jane, Darcy, and the guys from angry civilians, but also protecting the civilians from Loki. Not that he'd been all that interesting, lately. Darcy had to admit, a perverse part of her found this sullen and broken-to-the-point-of-harmless--yes, "harmless"--Loki downright disappointing.

Jane's new trailer was situated on the outskirts of town, where the lots were big--two to five acres--and the housing a crazy mix of McMansions and trailer homes. Theirs was the kind of neighborhood that would give an upscale homeowner's association fits of apoplexy.

The vehicle passed Rafaela Tapia's place first. Mrs. Tapia, a seventy-year-old widow, lived in an ancient single-wide trailer home, a long white metal rectangle with a rusty metal trailer hitch on the north end. If the SUV's windows were down, Darcy would have been able to hear the combined noise from a few dozen wind chimes that hung from Mrs. Tapia's porch. Plastic and silk flowers, woven into the sagging chain link fence that surrounded the property, fluttered in the light breeze.

The Richards's place was surrounded by a tall adobe wall. The house, a sprawling Mediterranean with red tile roofs and brown stucco, took up most of the two-acre lot. The grounds were meticulously landscaped, New Mexico style, with ten tons of tan gravel mulch, a few struggling yucca plants and a couple of stray tumbleweeds. Two fat white pitbulls slept in the shade by the front gate.

Carlos Martinez-Yazzie's home was a marvel of redneck architecture: three single-wide trailers stitched together to form one U-shaped super trailer. A short wall of tires ran the length of the road and landscaping consisted of a collection of dead appliances that sprouted from the barren ground like giant tombstones.

"Next up," muttered Darcy, "The Tony Stark junkyard."

An unfortunate side effect of being a super genius who could cobble together an arc reactor in a cave from spare missile parts was that Stark saw the potential for great things in just about everything. Especially stuff that he could find cheap on eBay or Craig's List. If Tony were just an ordinary schmuck, he'd be living in a two-bedroom apartment stuffed to the rafters in broken, and largely useless mechanical detritus. In short, Iron Man was a hoarder.

Pepper wouldn't tolerate his junkyard aesthetic at any of his million dollar plus houses, so he'd asked Jane if he could store a few spare parts on the property. "Come on, you've got three acres, who will it bother, the coyotes?" he had said. Jane--unfailingly nice, Jane--had agreed. What began with a few small engine parts, stored in a metal shed, now spilled all over the property.

Jane parked the SUV next to Darcy's little blue Honda, and everyone got out and made for the house. "Oh, look," said Darcy, "we've got new junk." Something that was either the front end of a missile or the world's largest sex toy sat next to Jane's old travel trailer.

Jane pushed her fingers through her long brown hair. "Is there anything he won't buy?"

"A functioning toaster?" offered Darcy, but Jane just sighed and marched ahead, clomping up the wooden stairs to the trailer's small porch. Darcy paused, letting everyone else go on ahead. The sun had started to set, painting the clouds in shades of purple, pink and orange. The trailer, white siding with dark gray trim and faux shutters, picked up the sky's vivid hues. The celestial tableau was mirrored in the shiny stainless steel grill that sat on the porch. Thor's grill, because all men, even gods of thunder, loved cooking dead animals over an open fire.

At the sound of tires crunching on gravel, Darcy turned to see the black SUV backing up and onto the road. With Loki in the house, already hiding in the room he and Thor shared, only to emerge for dinner, their escort would return to base. The trailer probably had as many electronic bugs as the six-legged variety, and throughout the night a security team would drive by making sure nothing was amiss.

She waved, getting an answering wave from the driver, but none from his partner. No doubt, a casualty of her decision to sit in the back with Loki. There'd always been an assumption among many that if Thor had Jane, then Loki had Darcy. Sharing a seat with him only confirmed the rumor. Even though she was in closer proximity before, when she sat in the front, just a few feet before him. Darcy pushed the thought aside, burying it with every other thing that could eat her alive from the inside. "Live in the moment" was her mantra. No wallowing in the past, live in the now with an eye to future.

Above her head a set of wind chimes, a gift from Mrs. Tapia, sang a cheerful melody in the hot afternoon breeze. The door to the trailer squeaked open and Thor poked his head out. "What are we having for dinner, Darcy?"

"Red beans and rice." A big super-sized version purchased at Costco, because when you live with two gods, shopping at warehouse stores is a necessity. "With sausage. Fire up the grill, big guy." Thor beamed a million watt smile and hurried over to the grill.

Darcy grinned, feeling a peculiar sense of peace. Yeah, she was trapped in this weird job (skillz or no skillz, it wasn't like SHIELD was letting her go, knowing what she knew), with bizarro roommates but lately she'd found a surprising sense of contentment. Casting one last look at the pretty sunset, she went into the house to make dinner for her strange family.

## Chapter 2

### CHAPTER TWO

Darcy woke to the brilliant light of the full moon and the sound of caterwauling coyotes, the racket bearing a stronger resemblance to yipping Chihuahuas than fearsome predators. She sat up, threw aside the sheet and glared out the window. "Really? Coyotes howling at the moon? Could you get any more cliché?"

The unfortunate side effect of being woken up at--she squinted at the clock radio--2 AM, was that sleeping through the fearsome cramps in her belly wasn't an option. She started to reach for the drawer in the nightstand where she kept painkillers, but remembered that she'd recently purchased a better option. That is, provided Jane's live-in god hadn't gotten to it first. She'd hidden her treat under a bag of frozen spinach, assuming that unlike Popeye, Thor didn't need leafy greens to maintain his physique, but then again, the guy ate just about anything.

A dusting of pale light on the hallway's carpet and wall greeted her when she opened her bedroom door. The cause, the kitchen light, became apparent as she padded across the living room. Loki sat at the table, staring out the window. Instead of his usual accidental-cosplayer garb of leather and metal, he wore a long-sleeved black shirt, black pants and black socks. Supervillain pajamas, she supposed. He didn't acknowledge her, so she shrugged and opened the freezer.

"Behold the power of spinach." Her carton of Oreo Cookies and Cream was snuggled safe, sound and unopened under the frozen veggies. Taking a spoon from the dishwasher (getting folks to load and run the thing was no problem; unloading? Not so easy) she proceeded to the table, easing herself into a chair across from the brooding god.

After a brief skirmish with the top, she opened the carton and dug out the first delicious bite of chocolate and ice cream. "So, you decided to hold a pity party and didn't invite me," she observed, knowing full well silence was the better part of valor, but forging on anyway, "Gosh, and I thought we were friends."

His eyes, dark and hooded under heavy lids, slid the fractional distance from the window to her. If he thought she'd be intimidated by his look, he was wrong. Armed with a carton of heavenly ice, nothing could hurt her.

"And yet, here you are," he said.

"I minored in party crashing. So what's up?"

"You, unfortunately."

She fortified with another yummy bite, feeling pain subside with each mouthful. "Sorry about that, but the curse is back after a month long hiatus, and this time it's war." A suggestion of confusion crept across his lean face, so she elaborated. "I got my period. Cramps." Too much information, but Darcy knew that the one thing that made guys squirm was the mention of anything regarding the functioning of lady parts.

Loki, however, was unfazed. "Oh, and this is the cure." His gaze dipped to the ice cream.

"Who knew medicine could taste so good." She waved the spoon at him. "I've overshared. Now it's your turn. What's got you up at this hour, schmoping?"

"Schmoping?"

"A get-together with yourself and all your miseries."

"Ah, and what makes you think I'd wish to...share with you?"

She made an exaggerated show of looking around the room. "Don't see anyone else here. Or would you prefer Thor?" She started to push herself up.

"No!" he said, starting to rise, then stopped. "I mean...no."

"Psyche!" She sat and took another bite. "No way am I waking Bearded Beauty. He'll expect me to share my frozen painkiller."

"It's possible," he said in a tone rich with velvety menace, "that I could turn you into something small and easily squashed, one of your native cockroaches, perhaps?"

A tendril of fear crept up her back, or maybe it was just another cramp. *Apply more ice cream.*

"You don't want to do that. Have you ever squashed a roach? It's disgusting, that crunching sound and the way the bug goo sticks to your shoe." She tilted sideways in her chair, looking at his feet. "Definitely don't want to go bug stomping in socks."

His attention had drifted from her and once again was fixed on the window so Darcy studied him as she ate. If he was going to do such a good job of pretending she wasn't there, she'd stare at him like a hidden observer.

Immortals heal fast, but it had taken him almost a month to recover from quality time with Papa Odin. His long supervillain hair had been the first casualty of the encounter; it had been so clotted with blood that Thor had been forced to hack most of it off. "Remind me not to get my hair done at Thor's salon," Darcy had said of the aftermath. (Her purple hair being Loki's response to her critique.) Several months later, the bad cut had grown out and the mass of bruises and gashes that had been his face was replaced with smooth, pale skin except for a faint patch of scarring around his left eye. Remembering that injury, she shuddered. It was a wonder he still had an eye at all.

Apparently, he could only ignore her for so long. Without looking at her, he snarled, "Is there a reason you stare?"

"Well, I still don't know the answer to the question, 'What does a Scotsman wear under his kilt?' but I now know what a supervillain wears to bed."

"What would you think I slept in?" He panned a long look over her and she was suddenly aware of her threadbare T-shirt with a pattern consisting of frolicking cartoon puppies.

"I dunno. Butt-nekkid?"

This earned her a smile. Not a good smile, but rather a smarmy, leering smile. "Are you in the habit of conjuring me as I sleep?"

"Yeah, the word is 'nightmare,' bucko. And you must need a forklift to haul around that ego." Despite her words, she could feel a blush heating her face. *Dammit. Need more ice cream.* She jabbed the spoon into the ice cream, getting a generous spoonful and proceeded to put it all in her mouth, hoping brain freeze would offset the heat in her face. Because she couldn't meet his eyes, she focused on his left shoulder. Unfortunately, her mind had now seized on the idea of him naked. Under that black shirt was what? Lean muscle? Yum.

"You've ducked my question like skinny fighter in the ring with Mike Tyson," she said, desperate to change the subject.

"What question?" His eyes narrowed, smile fading. "Oh, *that* question." Setting his elbow on the table, he leaned his chin into his hand. "I'm bored."

"My band director in high school used to say that only boring people get bored."

"Hmmm. Then I'm now the most tedious being in all the realms."

"You need a hobby. Something that doesn't involve alien invasion or dyeing my laundry green. How about golf?"

"Your cure for boredom would have me hitting a little white ball into a hole in the ground?"

"Ah," said Darcy, "You've heard of the game. And yeah, it might be fun, a challenge, provided you don't use magic and cheat."

"I always cheat."

"O-kay, then take up golf and cheat like your life depends on it." She gestured toward the bedrooms. "Hey, anything has to be better than listening to the beautiful people make lovey-dovey noises at each other." Though Thor shared a bedroom with Loki, he spent most nights in Jane's room.

A tiny smile that seemed genuine cracked his stony visage and then vanished just as quickly. He resumed his study of the window beyond and Darcy continued dosing herself with ice cream.

Oddly, it was Loki who broke the silence several minutes later. "Is it good?"

"What?" Following his line of sight, she nodded. "The ice cream? Oh, hell yeah. Better than sex."

His eyes widened, a touch of a smirk on his lips. "Really? Might I have a taste?"

"Sure." She pushed the carton across the table, realizing just as her fingers left it, that she should probably get him his own spoon.

If he was bothered by the idea of Darcy cooties, he didn't show it, instead picking up the utensil and scraping up a small icy chunk that didn't extend more than halfway up the spoon's tip.

"Oh, come on," said Darcy. "It's ice cream, not poison. Get a big scoop. A big manly, Thor-size scoop." At his scowl, she raised her hands in surrender, "Okay, shouldn't have used the T-word. Just take more than that, it won't kill you."

"It might," he said, but there was ghost of a smile on his mouth.

"If you can take an ass-whooping from an un-jolly green giant with anger management issues, then you definitely can survive a mouthful of ice, sugar, milk and Oreo cookies." Okay, that pushed it too far, as his expression darkened. "Try it," she said to deflect.

Shooting her another dark look, he nevertheless carved out a sizeable portion of ice cream and then gingerly tasted it, taking a small bite, then larger. She watched his lips move and decided it was the sexiest thing she'd seen in long time and then decided that had to represent an abysmal low in her life. It wasn't that she didn't know her psycho roommate was hot. But normally she remembered that his pretty green eyes and angular good looks hid the mind of a stone cold killer. Nonetheless,

when he finished, she eyed the dark hallway, wondering if anyone would notice if she took a shower at this hour. A long, cold shower.

He shook his head, dark speculation in his emerald eyes.

"What? You can't not like ice cream, you just can't."

"It's delicious," he replied. He replaced the spoon and slid the carton back to her. "But if you think it's better than sex, you're either a maiden, or you've been with the wrong men." With that he smirked, a full on sexy smirk that send hot blood rushing to Darcy's face and considerably south.

"Goodnight," he said. Clearly pleased with himself, he rose and left.

"Ugh," said Darcy, balling up a paper towel and throwing it at his retreating back. It was on fire before it hit the floor--the linoleum, fortunately, not the carpet. "Put that out! You burn it; you buy it." He ignored her and slipped into his room, leaving Darcy to jump up, fill a glass of water and put out the floor.

"Next time I make dinner, I'm putting cat food in your meal," she said to the silent hallway.

\*\*\*

When her clock radio went off, Darcy woke immediately. Blame it on the sugar rush from late-night ice cream, or perhaps the excitement of putting out a fire and mopping up the mess, but after her late night snack with Loki, she was too wired to sleep.

She sat up, threw off the sheet and stared at her legs, imagining the ice cream settling its fatty self into her thighs, getting married and raising huge litter of plump children on her hips. Time to log some miles on her mountain bike. Getting up, she changed into her biking shorts and a T-shirt, and headed out, dorky biking helmet in hand.

The house was still quiet. In another--she looked at her watch--forty minutes there'd be a mad rush when Jane stopped hitting the snooze button, hauled herself and Thor out of bed, and got ready for work. This would be followed by another small kerfuffle when Thor awoke his snarling not-sibling. But, now, blessed silence. She stopped by the fridge to grab a water bottle and turned for the door.

The desert air smelled fresh and clean, with a lingering undertone of moisture, although the hot sun would soon bake away any remains of yesterday's rain. She shut the door behind her and walked across the porch, her eyes on the neighborhood beyond.

Her right foot hit something hard and heavy, and before her brain could tell it to stop, so too did her left. Unbalanced, she fell forward, arms whirling futilely. She almost caught herself, getting a leg under her, except her foot landed on whatever tripped her and slid off. Completely out of control, she fell face-first, down the short rise of steps.

Instinctively, she put her arms out, her hands landing awkwardly on the second and last steps, but her body twisted and her right hip crashed into the top step. It happened so fast, that she couldn't even remember what happened next, except that she ended up in the dirt, on her side, lower legs still on the steps. Angry clusters of pain erupted on her hip and knee. Motionless, she lay there, staring across the lot, eyes on one of Tony's prize pieces of junk, the passenger section from a jet which sat under an old gnarled cottonwood tree, about twenty feet away. Something made a wet, glugging sound and she saw the water bottle, top knocked open, spilling water lethargically onto the dirt.

Sitting up, she pulled her legs toward her, bruised hip raising fiery agony. Her feet tangled with something--her helmet. "You don't need a helmet for riding, Darcy, you need it for walking," she muttered grimly, looping the helmet's straps around her wrist and rising slowly to her feet, her right knee joining the hip's protest.

Except Darcy wasn't particularly clumsy.

She panned a slow look up the stairs and her heart lurched. Her mouth fell open and she felt sure she was about to shriek like a woman in a horror film, but nothing came out. Swaying from shock and pain, she took two wobbly steps toward the porch and bent to look at the person who lay there.

Person. Shit. More like corpse. Her stomach roiled and for moment she tasted Oreos. Turning away, hand clutching her belly, she bent and grabbed the water bottle. Thankfully, a few mouthfuls remained and she gulped them down, trying to fight back nausea.

*I'm not some screaming ninny in a movie. I'm mostly unflappable Darcy.* Steeling herself, she turned and looked at the body on the porch. It was unquestionably a body, though once it had been Andy Valenzuela, one of SHIELD's guards, although at the moment he wore civilian clothes and not his uniform.

"Andy." She spoke his name. Andy, one of the few guards who hadn't automatically assumed that sharing a roof with Loki, meant sharing his bed. Andy, who called her Professor Lewis, even though he knew she was no PhD. Andy, who liked her even though he hated Loki with a passion.

Andy, who normally was a lovely shade of dark olive, but now was a peculiar grungy gray, his hands frozen before him like talons, eyes wide with shock. He looked like Han Solo after his dip in carbonite, except Darcy knew there probably wasn't going to be a defrosting and heroic rescue for Andy.

"Help," she said, her voice small. She fumbled for her cell phone, remembering that it still sat on her dresser. What was the point? She could just go in the house. But that meant climbing the steps and stepping over Andy. Her stomach lurched again. A lazy stream of blood meandered down her leg from her knee, warm in the cool morning air, soaking into her sock.

Despite her injuries and shock, she made it into the house and to Jane's door, where she knocked. "Jane. Thor. Hello?"

"Darcy?" said a sleepy Jane. "Could you come back later?"

"Later I might fall over. Please. We've got a problem."

Jane opened the door wearing a shirt that was obviously Thor's, and with a serious case of bed head. Taking one look at her bloodied roommate, her brown eyes widened in shock. "Thor! Get up! Now!"

\*\*\*

Several minutes later, Darcy was sitting on the toilet, its lid down, and Thor was inspecting her knee and hip. After centuries on the battlefield, he knew a thing or two about injuries. "It is not broken, but she should still be taken to a healer," he said to Jane who had just returned from calling SHIELD. Though their first impulse was to simply call 911, ultimately a corpse-sicle seemed more like SHIELD's jurisdiction anyway.

"I told Fury that Darcy was hurt. He said to stay put; he'd send a doctor out with the retrieval team." She came into the bathroom and put a hand on Darcy's shoulder. "Are you sure you didn't

bump your head?"

"No. Just my knee and hip. I'll be fine." After a bottle of Tylenol. She eyed the bathtub. And a long hot shower. She could probably leverage her injuries for more time in the bathroom. Besides, Thor usually used Jane's bathroom anyway. Of course, that still left Loki.

"Where is his royal surliness this morning?" asked Darcy.

"Still abed," rumbled Thor. Darcy could see a thought flit across Jane's mind and surprisingly even Thor picked it up. "It wasn't Loki. Killing a SHIELD agent would lose us their protection. Once again, he'd find himself in Odin's torture chamber."

*He had cookies and cream ice cream last night, thought Darcy. He should be in a happy place. Nobody goes on a killing spree with a tummy full of Oreos. Not even bored supervillains.*

The SHIELD team arrived with all the usual sound and Fury, with the latter glowering at everyone in a way that Darcy always found astonishing. The man got ten times the ferocity out of one eye than most people got from two. Curiously, other than asking Thor, "Where's Loki?" he didn't question anyone. One of the facility's doctors, a nice lady named Alice Winters, examined Darcy using a portable bone scanner (SHIELD's proprietary technology), cleaned and bandaged her knee and told her to come into the clinic if the pain worsened too much in a couple days. In less than half an hour, all traces of the dead body and the retrieval team were gone.



## Chapter 3

### CHAPTER THREE

"You don't have to come in today, Darcy." Jane stood in the doorway to Darcy's room, watching as she put on a pair of running shoes. Typically, Darcy made an attempt to dress "casual professional" for work, but today it would be hard enough to walk, without adding the complication of anything with a heel.

"I'm just sore." *Like somebody dropped a building on me.* "And I'll get bored here, alone, all day." With the ghost of Andy. As it was, just the thought of setting foot on the porch, where his body had been, gave her the heebies.

Everyone made for Jane's vehicle, and in the drive beyond, the black SUV waited. Darcy, however, took a few steps across the porch and the image of Andy's body flashed before her eyes. Her knees wobbled and her vision blackened. *No way, I'm not passing out.* She took another slow step, her vision brightening. Jane and Thor were already in the vehicle, Loki about to get in.

"Thor, could you help Darcy?" said Jane.

"Oh, of course." The big guy started to unbuckle his seatbelt.

Loki stopped, one foot in the SUV, hand on the top of the vehicle's door. His gaze fell heavy on Darcy, then on Thor, then back on Darcy, something that looked suspiciously like indecision in his eyes. With an exaggerated sigh, he stomped toward Darcy, attention on the ground before him, but his posture filled with the kind of maniacal rage that leveled skyscrapers. He swept toward her like an angry, leather-clad hawk, and Darcy froze like a rabbit, for the first time genuinely afraid of him. She let out a tiny squeak as he reached her, but her protest was cut off when he scooped her up effortlessly and carried her to the vehicle, settling her in the backseat. She got a whiff of soap and leather as he leaned over her, fastening the seatbelt. He slammed the door hard, and walked around the vehicle, his posture angry, and got in the other side.

Jane's hand, on the key in the ignition, didn't move, her jaw open in surprise. Thor started to say something to his brother, saw the look on his face and thought better of it, instead fastening his own seatbelt. The SUV's engine grumbled to life as Jane shook off her shock and turned the key.

After a few minutes of silence, Thor turned on the radio and fiddled with the tuning, settling on a country music station because in the middle of nowhere all stations are country.

Darcy shift her weight to her left side, trying to spare her hip. Loki gave her a quick glance and looked away. "Hey," she whispered. She nodded her head at the front seat. "I think you just gave Mom and Dad a heart attack."

"Perhaps that was the point." His tone was acrid, but his jaw twitched with a repressed smile.

\*\*\*

*Are you okay?*

At one o'clock, Sean contacted her through SHIELD's email. Fury had been adamant that Jane and company were not to mention the dead body to anyone; he wanted to keep the matter under wraps to facilitate the investigation. So naturally, by now, most of the facility probably knew. The place was worse than high school.

*Yeah. Just a little banged up.*

*So did he kill Andy?*

Darcy didn't bother to ask, "Who?" *No. It's totally not his M.O.* At least, she hoped it wasn't.

*Lunch?*

As she left the Fish Bowl, Loki cast her a brief look, opened his mouth as though to speak and then turned away to scribble something on the notepad before him.

Seeing her slight limp, Max Padilla cocked his head to the side. "What happened to you?" His expression darkened and he glared at the Fish Bowl. "Did that asshole-?"

"No," said Darcy, studying his expression. He didn't seem to know about Andy. "I, uh, fell off my bike, hit a patch of sand." On the ride up the lift, the enormity of what Loki had done this morning finally struck her. In the close quarters of the lift, her body decided to remember what it felt like when he swooped her up, the shock of his arms tight around her, the feel of his long stride beneath her. How for the briefest of moments, she pressed her cheek to his chest and felt absurdly safe. When the lift doors opened, she was shaking.

"You all right, Ms. Lewis?" asked Pam Johnson, the guard on duty on Floor One. Darcy simply nodded because she didn't trust her voice not to crack like an adolescent boy's.

Sean met her at the door to the break room, his blue eyes soft with concern. "Are you in pain?" With a hint of hesitancy, he reached and took her hand. She forced a smile and looked him over, pushing aside Loki thoughts with the image of the cutest accountant ever. He wore a black sport jacket over a gray T-shirt, jeans and dark brown boots. His hair was at least two weeks past a needing a cut, giving him a delicious disheveled look.

"Not yet," she replied. "Just stiff. The doc said it would be worse tomorrow and the next day." She gave the room a quick perusal, noting two agents in black suits, both generic clean cut white guys, who sat in the far corner of the room, backs to the wall, facing the door. A cluster of four guards were seated near the door. They all nodded and said hello as she and Sean went by, destination the vending machines. So far, Andy's mysterious death hadn't made her a total pariah.

Sean bought a sandwich, pastrami, and Darcy got a turkey sandwich, figuring she needed more than empty calories if she was going to heal. She also bought candy bars for everyone.

"Does Fury have any suspects?" asked Sean.

"Not yet. I hope he finds whoever did it soon, though." She peeled the bread back from the sandwich, checking for onions. "It's going to be creepy, out there in the boondocks, knowing somebody dropped a dead body on our porch."

"You really don't think he did it?"

"No. He usually goes for something more flamboyant."

"The deaths of women and children?" said Sean dryly.

Darcy shuddered, again remembering Loki's touch, the way his presence surrounded her. "Yeah. Can we talk about something else?" Finding the sandwich onion-free, she took a bite.

"I'm sorry. Sure."

Their lunch ended with him asking her out to dinner that weekend, something that usually left her with high spirits, but today she was too heartsick over Andy, and conflicted over Loki to do more than smile politely and say, "Love to."

That evening, the drive home was uneventful, save for the fact that Loki grudgingly helped her in and out of the SUV. "Look," she said, at home, when he started to help her out. "If you don't want to help me, don't."

He paused, then put his hands on the top edge of the vehicle's door frame and leaned in toward her, his body blocking the afternoon sunlight. "Don't," he said, with a careful enunciation, accentuated with princely arrogance, "presume to know my motives." His posture, though outwardly relaxed, vibrated with a sense of menace.

Darcy gulped and shrank back. But her mouth moved anyway, "Look, Mad Science, the last thing I want is a trip inside the asylum that is your brain. But you're acting like I'm road kill that's been simmering in the hot sun and you're the highway department flunky who has to shovel me up."

The furrow between his eyebrows deepened, and behind him, she heard Thor say, nervously, "Loki..." *And then, kiddies, Darcy grew six legs, a hard brown carapace, and an aversion to light.* She pushed her glasses up her nose, waiting to be turned into a cockroach and hoping it wouldn't hurt too much.

He closed his eyes briefly and when he opened them, some of the tension had fled his face. "Your friends in the black vehicle already speculate too much regarding your relationship with me, do they not?"

"After fantasy football, it's their number one hobby," she replied with more bitterness than she'd like. "You're acting like an asshat for my sake?"

"For both. I have a reputation to maintain as well." Darting a look back at Thor, he said to her, in a low voice, "I would like to assist you, Darcy Lewis, if you'd allow it."

A snotty reply died on her lips, because she had a strange sense that speaking those words cost him a lot. "Okay."

She got out with his help and he offered her his arm, which she took gratefully, because even the short trip in the vehicle had stiffened her knee and hip. Approaching the porch, her feet slowed as the image of Andy's frozen, contorted body returned.

"It's just a place," came Loki's voice, low and resonant. "Don't give it power over you."

"You're right. The past is...the past." With that she continued on and up the stairs, shoving the ugly memory aside.

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About an hour later, midway through Jane's spaghetti dinner, the doorbell rang. Thor opened the door to find Fury, along with Terrance and Miguel, two of the SHIELD's baddest bad asses outside of Natasha Romanoff, on their doorstep. It was fortunate that the two came in different flavors--Terrance: African American, Miguel: Latino--since they were otherwise indistinguishable. Both had been popped from the same G.I. Joe mold: square jaws, buzz cuts and muscles on top of muscles.

"Come outside, *all* of you," said Fury in a tone that brokered no argument.

Darcy followed Jane and Loki out the door, a slice of garlic bread in hand, and a mixture of apprehension and resentment swirling in her stomach. The sun had sunk below the horizon, and daylight had nearly lost its battle with dark. On the way out, she switched on the porch light.

When the four were standing on the porch, Jane asked Fury, "Have you found anything out about the murder? How was Andy killed?"

"Frozen. Instantly. Our coroner estimates he was killed sometime around two in the morning." Fury's attention was on Jane, but Miguel and Terrance immediately glared at Loki, who ignored them, purposefully looking bored.

Darcy took a bite of bread. "Who would do such a thing?" said Thor voicing the question that was on everyone's mind.

"Well," drawled Fury, "It would be an easy way to kill, if you were a frost giant." This briefly got Loki's attention, but only briefly.

Fury tilted his head back to the car. "I'm gonna ask you *nicely* to come back with us to the facility," he said to Loki.

"I don't understand," said Thor. "Is my brother a suspect?"

"Of course he is," grumbled Terrance. "You see any other frost giants around here?"

"Why would Loki kill this man?" persisted Thor.

"Because he's an asshole," snarled Miguel. Fury shot the man a hard look and he stared at his combat boots.

"Look, I'm not arguing with you about this," said Fury. "It's been a long day, I've--"

"Wait!" Everyone turned and looked at Darcy who took a step forward. "You said around two am, right?" she asked. Fury nodded. "Then it couldn't have been Loki. He was with me."

"Darcy, really?" said Jane, as though Darcy had just confessed to skinning kittens and cooking them over an open fire.

"Ugh. Want some bleach for that dirty mind, Jane?" She stared squarely at Fury. "I said with me, not in me. We were having a chat."

Even Thor seemed to find that incredible. "Chat? My brother does not chat."

"Okay, so I did the chatting, and he growled and made rude comments. Point is, unless he can be in two places at once, he didn't kill that guy."

"Actually," Loki cleared his throat, "I can be two places at once. Several, in a manner of speaking."

"Oh," said Darcy, realizing her error. "Sorry, I tried." A millisecond later, she thought of something else. "Wait! Your other-Lokis, can they eat ice cream?"

"They're projections, so no."

"The not-chatty Loki I saw last night likes cookies and cream ice cream," Darcy proclaimed smugly to Fury and his men. "He also nearly set the kitchen on fire."

"We have ice cream?" muttered Thor, wide-eyed.

"The kitchen? Fire?" said Jane.

"Yeah, well, until we can be sure it wasn't him, he's coming with us," said Fury.

"But, no," said Jane, "That's not fair." She shrank a little under Fury's stern one-eyed glare, her attention going to Thor. Darcy knew what she was thinking. Where Loki went, so too did Thor.

"Jane's right," said Darcy, realizing that she was fighting to keep her nutso, fire-starting roomie, "Innocent until proven guilty, right?"

"Wrong," replied Fury.

Darcy shook her head. "Why would he kill somebody and leave them on the front porch, when he could have used magic to hide the body?"

"Why did he slaughter people in New York?" said Fury. "He's-"

"He was not in his right mind," said Thor, going into auto-Loki-defense mode. Terrance grumbled something at Miguel, and the two scowled at Thor.

Darcy looked out across the property, her gaze moving over the extent of the lot and to the next, where Carlos's ancient Ford truck rumbled up his driveway, a refrigerator in the back, a new addition to the appliance graveyard. She turned and met Fury's hard stare. "Was Andy even on duty last night?"

"No," answered Terrance, before Fury could speak.

"Then he shouldn't have been within 100 feet of Thor or Loki. So long as Thor is home, Loki isn't going anywhere."

"Thor was home, all night," affirmed Jane with a bright blush.

"The conniving bastard figured out a way to get Andy," said Terrance, voice dripping hatred, and Darcy knew she was adding fuel to the stupid-girl-falls-for-the-villain rumor fire. But if Loki was hauled off to SHIELD's Gitmo for supervillains, Jane would lose snuggling time with Thor. And besides, Loki was a monster, but hey, he was Darcy's monster--sort of.

"You don't know that," she said, bracing herself against the fiery stares of Fury and his men. "And has anyone actually thought of asking him if he did it?"

"He'll lie," said Miguel, Terrance nodding.

"Quiet," snapped Fury. With a nod to Darcy, he turned to Loki. "Did you kill Andy?"

Darcy studied the faces of the people around her. Thor watched his brother, blue eyes bright with almost naive expectation. Worry creased Jane's brow. Fury was all poker face.

Finally, Darcy let her eyes move to Loki, up to the straight lines of his face, eyes shadowed and expression grim. *Please say no, please say no.* She wouldn't put it past him to say yes, or refuse to answer, just to be an antagonistic jerk. His lip curled and inside she cringed, expecting the worse.

"No," he snarled. "I no longer squash bugs, it's messy and pointless."

"Son of a--" Terrance reached for his sidearm, but Fury snapped a hand to the guard's arm, grip tight, stopping him.

"That was tactful," she hissed at Loki. "See?" She gestured at Loki then back at Fury, the motion made somewhat silly by the garlic bread in her hand. "He didn't do it."

In the tightness of the moment, Darcy felt Terrance and Miguel's glares closing in on her, and she realized all the capital her defense of Loki had cost her. Was it worth it? She glanced at Jane and Thor, remembering how devastated Jane had been the first time the big guy had left. Feeling herself withering under Terrance and Miguel's angry stares, she took a huge bite of garlic bread and chewed, because eating always made her feel braver.

At long last, Fury nodded. "All right. He can stay here. For now." He sent a stern look at his men, cutting them off mid-grumble. With one last rock-hard glare, aimed largely at Loki, he stomped off the porch and to the waiting SUV, Terrance and Miguel following like sullen teens.

"Because I know my brother won't," began Thor, "I thank you, Darcy." When Darcy met his eyes, she saw a touch of weary sadness there.

"...not your brother," muttered Loki.

"No prob, big guy." She smiled. "There's still some ice cream left."

"Is there?" He brightened and Jane smiled too. A bounce in his step, the big blond headed back into the house, destination the freezer, no doubt. Jane followed. Loki didn't move, his gaze fixed on the departing SUV. Once it had left the property, red taillights moving up Don Tenorio Road, he pointed toward a spot near the stairs. "Is that where you found the body?"

"Uh, yeah." Her stomach wrenched and she ate more bread to still it.

He moved forward, crouched and held out his right hand, fingers spread, palm down over the spot. Darcy took a step and then also crouched, except pain erupted from her knee and hip. Before she could stop, she put her left hand on Loki's shoulder to steady herself. She cringed, expecting a growl, but he took no notice.

Then abruptly, he shifted his weight, and snatched her hand from his shoulder, long fingers around her wrist. She tried to pull away, but was trapped in his fierce grip.

"Relax," he hissed.

"You're hurting me!"

Loosening his grip, but not releasing her, he said, "Open your hand as I did, palm down."

"Why--?"

"Just do it."

She looked at his face, trying to figure out what crazy crap was going through his head. In the yellowy light of the porch light, his angular features were stark against the growing darkness, but his expression was mild with no indication that he was planning to turn a pesky mortal into an insect. She did as he asked.

And just as quickly she jerked her hand back.

"What did you feel?" he asked releasing her wrist.

"Pin and needles, like when I sleep on my arm and my hand falls asleep. And then something else,

something warm, kind of spicy, like cinnamon?"

At this, his grim expression cracked and a real smile escaped, white teeth flashing in the porch light. "Spicy?"

"Yeah, Mad Science, 'spicy.'" It was odd, feeling a taste. "What is that?"

His smile faded and he studied the wood panels that made up the porch floor. "The first, 'pins and needles,' is the magical signature of the killer. The second, I believe...is my magical signature."

"Yours? The killer's?" Her thoughts whirled in a jumble. "I don't do magic. How come I felt it?"

"Because I allowed you to sense it, through me." He shrugged. "Although you seem to have a slight affinity..." His eyes narrowed and he skimmed his hand over the floor again, head tilted like a dog listening to a distant whistle. Timidly, Darcy opened her hand and held it over the porch. She felt a tremor in her hand, then nothing.

"Do it again," she said, in a low whisper. "I want to feel it again."

He complied, the warmth of his hand on her wrist distracting until the sensation of magic hit. "It feels horrible and ... familiar," she observed seconds later.

"Horrible?" A suggestion of hurt tinged his voice.

"The killer's magic, not yours. I've felt that before." She popped the last of the bread in her mouth and then ran her fingers through her hair. "That's crazy, though. I don't know anything about magic." When she met his eyes, the intensity of his stare held her.

"Where have you felt that before?" His eyes burned with a kind of desperation.

"I don't know. I really don't, Loki." She swallowed, thinking that she'd never actually said his name before.

The use of his name appeared to startle him too. He turned and stared darkly toward the road. "I've felt it before as well, but I can't remember..."

"You think you've met this person."

He drew his lips back from his teeth, like a predator scenting the air, eyes narrowed. "I think it's more a matter of a type of magic, not a particular individual."

"Frost giant magic?" she said airily.

"I don't know!" he snapped with a ferocity that rocked her back on her heels. Unbalanced, she fell onto her butt, jarring her sore hip. Leaning back on her hands, she tried to look like she meant to do that.

"But you're all about magic. How can you not know?"

"Because I can't remember--anything!" His answer came out loud, anguished and he sprang to his feet. Darcy stared up at him, unnerved; his lanky, leather-clad form menacing in the blue black darkness. A few seconds later, the sound of heavy footsteps followed and the trailer door opened.

"Darcy. Loki. Is something amiss?" asked Thor.

"Nope." She smiled breezily up from her spot on the floor. "We're just having another chat, Darcy-

Loki-style."

Thor looked at his not-brother, who still stood staring out into the darkness. "Ah, very well." The door clicked shut and the murmur of Jane's voice was followed by Thor's answer, "Darcy says they are chatting. Is there more bread?"

Darcy sighed and wondered how she was going to get up. Maybe if she scooted over to the stairs and leveraged herself up on the stair rails? A few feet from the stairs, a small black shape slunk out from a cluster of sagebrush and stopped where the porch's light met the dark.

"Hi, Inkblot." The black cat had come with the property, a stray, scrawny and half wild. On seeing his condition, Jane immediately started setting out food and water. He still wouldn't let anyone come close enough to touch him, but no longer ran at the sight of Jane, Darcy, or oddly, Loki. He remained terrified of Thor. Inkblot was still feral, but at least he wasn't starving.

"Come on, Mad Science, let's go in. Ink wants his dinner." Jane always set Inkblot's bowl on a tall stool on the porch, out of reach of skunks. Loki nodded, turned and glanced down at her.

"Comfortable?" He sneered.

She sneered back. "Yes."

"Then you don't need my help."

"Definitely not."

He held out his hand. "You should leave the lies to me."

She eyed the hand warily, then took it, and groaned in pain as he pulled her to her feet. His help gifted her with too much momentum, and she had put out her hand, stopping herself from crashing into his chest. His sudden proximity set her heart racing as beneath her palm, she felt the vague beat of his heart and she was hyperaware of her hand still in his. She stared at her other hand, fair against black leather, her eyes moving up to where his collar made a "v," framing the pale hollow of his throat. Her eyes got as far as his mouth before she wrenched her gaze away. *Oh, hell no, I'm not getting stupid over Loki.* It took tremendous effort, because a part of her kept insisting, "Touch the pretty man," but she managed move her hand away from his chest.

He look down at her, expressionless. "Cinnamon? Really?"

"Like on apple pie," she said, trying to sound nonchalant, except her voice was pitched a little too high. Before she did or said anything she'd regret, she disengaged her hand from his and hobbled into the house.

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Thor and Jane were nearing cute overload, chairs close together as they ate ice cream from the carton. Loki ignored them, plunking down in his chair to finish his dinner and read a novel, "borrowed" from Darcy's room.

Jane shook her head at Darcy who was limping to the sink. "Thor and I will take care of the dishes. Go to bed, Darcy." There was no point in attempting to get Loki's help; he'd snarl something about servants' work and never look up from the book.

If megalomaniacal urges were his heroin, then books were Loki's methadone. He devoured everything from dense scientific journals to romantic suspense (his current read, J.D. Robb's *Naked*



*in Death*), showing none of the persnickety fussiness that he displayed about every thing else Midgardian. (He was a particular pain about food, picking at his meals with more meticulousness than an FDA inspector.)

Realizing she was staring at Loki, and that Jane and Thor were watching her, Darcy said "Thanks guys," and headed down the hallway.

Back in her room, she took off her glasses and set them on her dresser, her eyes going to the spot where her iPod should have been. *Not again.* Loki was like a magpie, picking up any shiny thing that interested him and carrying it back to his room. On her way to the bathroom, she paused before the closed door of his room, then moved on. It was a perfect time to retrieve her stolen iPod and whatever else he'd filched from her room lately, but she was too bone tired to be bothered.

Returning to her room, she found Jane sitting on her bed. Even with the faint dark half circles under her eyes, and the overall weariness that emanated from her posture, Jane was still gorgeous, something Darcy noted with the usual touch of envy. Seeing Darcy, Jane said, "I wanted to apologize."

Darcy sat and stared sadly at her shoes, which looked so far away. "For what?"

"Everything."

Darcy looked up and grinned. "Everything? High gas prices? World hunger? The unintelligible microphone at the fast food drive thru? Spiders?"

Jane smiled and squeezed Darcy's hand. "I mean, this..." She waved her hand around the room. "This place, SHIELD, your poor knee, Thor and Loki." With her other hand, she rubbed her brows. "Especially Loki."

"I can handle Loki."

"You're the only one." She turned and looked out at the hall. "I know I should have said no when Fury wanted to move Thor and Loki in here. It wasn't fair to you. Or Erik." She sighed. "Poor Erik."

"He's okay. He says he likes New York. No scorpions and sometimes it rains."

"I'm supposed to be the principle investigator on this project but instead I let Fury push me around."

Darcy shrugged. "I think the chocolate cyclops always gets what he wants."

"Maybe," Jane's shoulders slumped, "but I also agreed out of selfishness."

"You mean because you wanted your ripped god back? Cut yourself some slack, Jane. A lot of women would probably sell off family members for some naughty time with Thor."

"No." Jane paused as Loki wandered past, and slipped into his room. "And yes. I missed him so much. But it wasn't just that." She edged closer to Darcy and said in a low voice, "I know this is horrible, but the chance to pick Loki's brain about magic..."

Darcy nodded. When Fury had asked Jane to take on the housing and feeding of the brothers (where "asked" equaled "ordered nicely"), he sweetened the deal with the promise that Loki would cooperate and share his knowledge of magic with Jane.

"He's smart, scary smart--"

"Or just scary," noted Darcy.

"That too, but there's so much he knows, and well, I know he's using me too--"

"He's using you? How?"

Jane shot a nervous glance at the hallway. "I think Odin did something to him, to his memories, he's almost...desperate for knowledge."

Darcy bit her lower lip, remembering his outburst on the porch. "That would explain why he joneses for books. Think he's planning to make himself emperor of all of us again?"

"Thor says he isn't, but he's been wrong before."

"Understatement."

"Do you really think he didn't kill Andy?" Jane's expression begged her to say yes.

She obliged. "Yeah." *I hope so, because otherwise I'm the huge tool who just defended Andy's murderer.* "It'll be okay. I promise."

Jane squeezed her hand again. "I'm sorry I dragged you into this mess. You've been a good friend."

She squeezed Jane's hand back. "It's not all that bad. I like my job and where else is a poli-sci major going to make this kind of money? I'm grossly overpaid and loving it." She gestured around her room. "Look. No college kid decor, no milk crate shelves or particle board furniture." Right after they'd moved into the trailer, Darcy had treated herself to an oak sleigh bed with a matching dresser and two nightstands. Above the bed hung three small original paintings of sunflowers that she'd picked up at a crafts fair in Santa Fe. Metal wall art, a yard sale find, composed of twisting vines and flowers, hung on the wall opposite the dresser. Her laptop computer sat on a small modular desk and bookshelf combo made of teak. A couple months before, with Thor's help (largely to move the furniture), she'd painted the bland white walls a pale, creamy yellow and applied a simple blue stencil pattern, more vines and flowers, along top of the walls. The room felt more like home than any place she'd lived in years.

"I've got a car, good credit...Crap!" Darcy gave Jane a horrified look. "I think I might be a grownup."

From the living room came the distant sound of angry birds cheering. "Three stars!" roared Thor.

"I think you may be the only one," said Jane with a weak smile.

"Wait'll he finds Plants vs. Zombies. There'll be no living with him."

"What can I do to help?" Jane pointed at Darcy's right leg.

"You could take my dinner night, tomorrow."

"Done."

"And," Darcy looked mournfully at her feet, "untie my shoelaces?"

## Chapter 4

### CHAPTER FOUR

Darcy slept a deep and mostly dreamless sleep, until right before her alarm went off. It woke her from a dream where Loki, a black silhouette against a green background, dressed in full armor with the horned helmet, did a little ass-wiggling dance, iconic white iPod in his hand.

SHIELD's doctor had been right, her injuries did feel worse this day. In fact, overnight, her knee and hip seemed to have hardened like concrete, painful concrete. In the bathroom, she undressed and pulled a face at her reflection in the mirror. Her body sported an ugly geography of bruises, with the one on her hip looking like a purple continent against her fair skin. Since she was the last one up, she spent extra time in the shower, using all the hot water.

The waking version of Loki was nowhere near as chipper as the dream, but he didn't act like Darcy was a fly in his soup. But when it came time to leave for work, he stalked out the door first. Darcy stared, confused, at his departing back, before she realized what was wrong. Over time, the four had fallen into the habit of leaving the house in a certain order: Thor leading the way, with Jane after, then Loki, and Darcy last. Darcy's position dictated by the fact that no one else remembered to lock the door.

There were, mercifully, no frozen corpses on the porch, but her hands still shook at the memory and she fumbled with the key, before it slid home and turned the deadbolt shut. Loki stood at the top of the stairs, waiting for her. At her approach, he took a step toward her. Because she didn't care to feel like luggage, she reached up and put her arms around his neck when he reached down to pick her up. In his arms, every cell in her body started vibrating, acutely aware of him, and she tried to look anywhere but at his face.

"Damn, you are tall," she said, because stupid banter felt like her only defense against the confusing attraction she felt for him. "Does Asgard have any short people? Or is there a height requirement? 'You must be this tall to ride this world.'"

As he settled her into the seat, he said, with a familiar sneer and one eyebrow quirked upward, "Yes, there are people of your diminished height. They are pitiful creatures. We, in our vast generosity, allow them to clean our toilets and scrub the mold from the baths."

"If I had my Taser, you'd so be on the ground, doing a dirt dance. " She rolled her eyes back in her head and acted out the twitchy aftermath of a Taser.

Thor, who'd been listening to the exchange, glanced nervously at Jane, who was just a bit shorter than Darcy. "He jests, of course," he said. Jane laughed quietly and started the vehicle.

Loki got in the SUV, pulled a book, another of Darcy's--*The Secret Life of Bees*--from somewhere in his leather armor and immediately began reading. Maybe that was why he preferred Asgard clothing; it had more places to hide stuff.

She curled her fingers, except for thumb and pinky, toward her palm and mimed a phone to her ear. "Hello? Mr. Mad Scientist? We appreciate your patronage of Darcy's library, but your book is way overdue." Of course, he ignored her.

Thor meanwhile, was grouching about last night's events. "...and he immediately blames Loki."

"Well, he is...Loki," replied Jane, slowing the vehicle to let a covey of quail scurry across the road.

"He's done no one any harm." Thor motioned toward Darcy. "And he has shown kindness to Darcy after her injury."

"It wasn't kindness," said Loki, not looking up from the book. "I simply grew tired of watching her flaunt her mortal weakness."

Darcy lifted her chin and smiled a smug, closed-mouth smile. "Nuh-uh. It's kindness. You like me."

"No. You are...crass and given to expounding on whatever idea flits through your head."

"Which is why you like me."

"I don't...like you."

"Liar. Somebody get a fire extinguisher, because your pants are on fire."

"And childish," grumbled Loki.

In the front seat, Thor and Jane were already ignoring their bickering.

"Fury knows of other people, other beings who are capable of wielding magic," argued Thor.

"There are ordinary mortals, like Stark, who might be capable of constructing a device capable of such a thing."

"Knowing Tony, he built a freeze-ray in pre-school," said Jane. "But I don't think he dropped by to kill Andy."

"Yeah, we can't even get him to come by and visit his junkyard," said Darcy.

"And yet, Fury blames Loki," said Thor.

"Occam's Razor," was Jane's reply.

"And what is that? Some sort of weapon?" asked Thor.

"Even in the simplest conversation, he requires explanatory footnotes," grumbled Loki, looking up from the book. "'Other things being equal, a simpler explanation is better than a more complex one.' Although that's an inaccurate approximation of the principle. In other words, Fury is simply leaping on the easiest explanation."

"But it isn't," protested Darcy. "You've got no motive."

"I'm quite mad, I don't need a motive." He met her eyes, a hint of humor in his green eyes.

"You may be a few beans short of a Taco Bell combo meal, but that doesn't mean you killed Andy."

"The SHIELD agent said nasty things to me," he replied, dryly. "My feelings were hurt. Hence, he is dead."

Darcy snorted. "Riiight. *You*. 'Feelings.'" Catching movement in the corner of her eye, she looked out the window, past her faint reflection in the glass to where a roadrunner struck a pose by the side of the road, long black tail lifted high and a lizard dangling limply in its beak. Her thoughts turned to just after she awoke, right after the funny image of the dancing Loki faded, replaced by a revelation. She spoke it aloud: "Fury knows Loki didn't kill Andy."

"What?" Thor turned in his seat. "Then why lay blame on my brother?"

Loki muttered his usual protestation regarding familial relations, but Darcy talked over him. "He didn't outright blame him. He just asked him to come back to base. I think it was just for show. If he really thought Loki was the killer, he would have brought more guards, marched into the house and hauled him away."

"Darcy's right," said Loki.

"I'm right?" Darcy said. "Did somebody get that on camera?"

Loki lifted his eyes from the book. "Darcy's arguments against my incarceration, however reasonable, wouldn't have swayed Fury if he had a shred of evidence against me. The house is infested with electronic listening devices, and SHIELD spends a small fortune on petrol, sending the black SUVs past the house every hour. He knows Thor and I were home all night."

"Why the subterfuge?" asked Thor.

"Maybe," said Jane, slowing the vehicle as they approached a four-way stop sign, "someone is trying to set Loki up for the murder."

"Yes," Thor said. "Someone seeking vengeance for Loki's crimes."

The vehicle stopped at the intersection and Darcy looked beyond Loki to the new stop sign, vibrant red and shiny. Two of the properties on the intersection looked post-apocalyptic, the ground blackened, burnt sagebrush reaching black arms to the sky, the buildings on both sides reduced to concrete foundations and broken, charcoaled walls.

Although some of the damage from Loki's misadventures in urban renewal remained in Puente Antiguo, this wasn't his doing, but rather the aftermath of a wildfire that had swept dangerously close to their home four months before. During the summer months, at any given time, something was on fire in New Mexico.

Loki's attention was also on the burn scar, and she studied him, thinking that he desperately needed a real haircut, Thor's sins against hairstyling evidenced by blunt uneven layers of black hair.

"Except the killer may not have been human," Darcy said, thinking out loud. "Humans can't do magic, right?"

"Some might," said Loki, his eyes on her once again.

The car began moving and Jane said, "How's that even possible?"

"This is hardly the first time Midgard has been visited by the Aesir," replied Loki. "And there have been others, from Alfheim, the elves. Any humans with magical power are likely the descendents of a mortal and immortal's by-blow."

Darcy smirked. "Speaking from personal experience?"

From the front seat, Thor let out a jovial laugh. "Of course. It was once common practice."

Darcy laughed. "You too, big guy?" Her grin faded a bit when she saw Jane's expression in the rearview mirror.

"Wait, you've slept with other mortal woman and fathered children?" said Jane, "You never

mentioned that. You said you've never met a mortal like me."

"I haven't," said Thor, blue eyes wide with confusion. Loki's emerald eyes, meanwhile, gleamed with mirth, his shoulders twitching with repressed laughter.

"The o-others," stammered Thor, "they-they meant nothing to me."

"Oh, bad move," muttered Darcy.

"Nothing?" snapped Jane. "Is that what you told them at the time?"

"No, I mean..." Thor stared blankly at Jane for an instant before his face took on the expression of someone who's realized he's just stepped off a very tall cliff. "Jane, it was centuries ago..." The god of thunder shrank under the usually mild-mannered physicist's ferocious glare. "Mind the road, my love." He gestured feebly ahead.

Loki barked a short laugh. "Even I know you shouldn't admit to tugging other mortal women, and I'm well...me."

Thor twisted in the seat to look at Loki. "You just did."

"I've blown up cities. I can't get any lower in their eyes."

"Compared to large-scale carnage, diddling the natives is pretty tame," Darcy agreed with a shrug.

Reaching to the front seat, she gave Jane's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Cut the big guy some slack. It's not like you can expect a guy his age and that cut," she let her eyes trace a line up Thor's muscular shoulder, "to be a virgin."

"That's not the problem," muttered Jane, "I'll-I'll tell you, later."

"Okay...back on topic." Darcy sat back in her seat.

"So," she said to Loki, "we can't scratch any humans off the suspect list."

"Precisely."

"Given all the friends you've made here on Earth, we've got a long list of suspects."

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Math and Darcy Lewis would never be friends, but as of late, they were at least on speaking terms. Which is why, when Jane handed her a sheet of paper with a couple of handwritten equations, Darcy didn't roll her eyes and say, "Looks like Greek to me." Well, some of it was Greek--tau, pi and omega--but her brain no longer locked up at the sight of a long complex equation. Today, as most days, she responded by grabbing Jane's arm and keeping her there while she tried to make sense of the physicist's scrawly writing.

"Is this a three or a five?"

"Uh," Jane bent and looked at the page. "Five."

"Two parentheses or one?"

"Two."

Pointing at the date and time ranges, written at the top of the paper, she said, "I don't have the data from July 15th through the 17th."

"Oh, right. I'll go pull it now." Jane turned and made for her desk, giving Thor a dark look as she passed by. Apparently, Thor had some *eggs-splainin'* to do tonight. Typically oblivious, he was still wrecking feathered vengeance on pigs in Angry Birds, but Jane had found him some earbuds, so at least he was doing it quietly.

Darcy didn't bother to look at the second equation. Written in Loki's exacting script, it would be utterly legible. The problem with his mathematical models wasn't readability. According to Jane, they were theoretically sound, but bizarrely unpredictable. They usually worked but when they didn't, they failed spectacularly. The results varied from innocuous--her computer screen taken over by Mandelbrot patterns--to damaging, and virus-like. Darcy had started calling him Mad Science after one equation made all the printers in the building spit out the first act of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with 16th century fonts and spelling.

She pulled her heavy sweater's sleeves down over her fingers and got to work. After about an hour, however, the sub-arctic temperature in the Fish Bowl started to penetrate the sweater. Shivering, she got up and limped to the thermostat, where she tapped the plus button futilely, watching the setting max out at 100, while the vents continued to spew frigid air.

"Hey, Mad Science, can't you mojo this thing somehow?" Loki looked up from the physics journal he was reading. "The cold is making me extra hurty."

"I'll call maintenance again," said Jane, who wore a sweatshirt and a hoodie.

Darcy went back to tapping the button, because maybe the activity would at least warm her finger. Suddenly, a warm hand clamped over hers. Turning, she found Loki immediately behind her. "You're sneaky," she said, pushing aside the urge to lean back and snuggle into his warmth, "You need a bell, like a cat."

He released her hand and tilted his head to the side. "Move." When she didn't comply, he set his hands on her shoulders and pushed her gently aside. As she watched, he lifted his right hand and moved his fingers. A wisp of green mist drifted to the thermostat and the screws holding the front plate started to unscrew. They dropped into his waiting left hand; he popped off the cover and studied the interior of the device. His elegant fingers danced again and with a loud click, the air conditioning stopped. After he replaced the cover and magicked the screws back, he set the thermostat to 70 and returned to his chair.

Darcy, Jane and Thor stared at him dumbfounded. "Why didn't you do that before, brother?" said Thor.

With a shrug, Loki said, "No one ever asked."

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At twelve thirty, Darcy made a lunch run. Jane offered to go instead, but Darcy waved her off. "It's worse when I don't move. Besides, I don't have to walk far."

Though she did her best to minimize her limp, Max frowned worriedly at her approach. "You look worse today." He started to her, but she shook her head. "I'm okay."

As she reached the lift, he said, "Why did you lie, girl?"

"Lie?"

"You're covering for him."

Darcy blinked, confused. Was this about Andy's murder? "I don't understand."

"He did this to you, didn't he?" Max gestured with his eyes at her right leg.

"No, I fell."

Max shook his head, and lifted his hand to rub his chin. "My sister, Angela, she was like you. She lived with this guy, Mark, and Mark...he beat her." Darcy started to speak, but he pressed on.

"Sometimes, she'd call the cops, but she never filed charges."

"He was slick. The worse he hurt her, the nicer he was afterwards." His gaze wandered back toward the Fish Bowl. "Just like that asshole is doing now. Yeah, I saw him, carrying you, acting like he gives a shit."

"He didn't hurt--"

"Then what's that, huh?" He reached and put his hand around her left wrist, lifting it. "Those are handprints. Just like on Angie."

Movement caught her eye and she turned. At this angle, she could see the outer wall of the Fish Bowl and the printer that sat next to the glass wall. Loki stood there, waiting for something to print. His hand was on the printer, long fingers tapping impatiently on the machine. If he noticed her and Max, he gave no indication.

The marks on her lower arm weren't much more than faint reddish stripes on her skin; if Max hadn't pointed them out, she may not have noticed them. Not when the rest of her body was splattered in a colorful graffiti of bruises. Her eyes darted from her arm and back to Loki and then to Max, who watched her with a knowing expression.

"He didn't...it wasn't..." She shut up, realizing that nothing she said could sufficiently explain what happened. At least, not without telling Max about Andy, when at this point, he didn't seem to know the details of his colleague's murder.

"What happened to your sister?" she asked.

Max let go of her arm and turned to hit the call button for the lift. "Mark came home one night, late, drunk, and threw her against a wall. She hit her head, massive hemorrhage...she was dead before the ambulance reached the hospital."

"I'm sorry," she said weakly, and limped onto the lift.

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The lift doors opened to reveal Sean who stood near Pam, the guard. The two had identical expressions of feigned pleasantness, neither obviously having any interest in small talk with the other.

Pam watched as Sean moved to offer her his arm. "You look like you were hit by a truck. What happened?"

"I fell...off my bike," she answered. That was the story she told Max, for all the good it did, and she was sticking to it like glue.



"I hope you were wearing your helmet, kiddo."

At "kiddo," Darcy shot her an amused look. Pam probably wasn't more than a couple years older than her. With a smile, she let it pass. After two tours in Iraq, Pam, an ex-Marine, more than earned the right to call her kiddo.

By its usual ghost town standards, the break room was positively bustling. The two generic G-Men types were back, sitting in the same strategically advantageous corner of the room. By the door, four guards argued energetically about the Broncos' defensive lineup, and two nurses in white uniforms sat nearby. Dr. Emily Banks and Dr. Rakesh Khandan were seated near the vending machines, steam rising from fresh cups of coffee before them.

Emily nodded a hello at Darcy, but Rakesh hunched his shoulders and continued an existing conversation, which appeared to be nothing more than a rant about plastic paperclips. Once, Rakesh had a bit of a crush on Darcy, an affection quickly extinguished by her cohabitation with Loki. In this case, Darcy couldn't say she missed the attention. His coffee breath could drop a bull elephant at twenty paces, and he was in the habit of standing too close and holding long conversations with her boobs.

She bought two packages of frozen, green chile chicken enchiladas, one for her, the other for Jane, and two BLTs for Thor. Loki never ate lunch, convinced the vending machine food was toxic, but after a moment of deliberation, she bought him a candy bar.

Sean bought red chile beef enchiladas, and after they'd heated their meals in the microwave, they sat down, a couple of tables away from the G-Men.

Because she needed to vent, she told him about her conversation with Max. "The Pope won't nominate him for sainthood, but it's not like Loki's responsible for everything bad that happens. Why assume he beat me up?" She bit her lip, realizing she sounded just like Thor.

Sean took a bite of enchilada, chewed, swallowed and then said, "Two beautiful women; two gods, one trailer. People jump to conclusions. He's had violent tendencies in the past. If he can't beat up the world, then..."

"...he beats on me." Darcy rolled her eyes and made an exasperated huff, noting that the G-Men seemed to be eavesdropping on the conversation. "Well, he didn't," she said forcefully, in case they were listening. "And if he did, Thor would kill him."

"The same Thor that sprang him from prison?" Sean's mouth quirked in a wry smile.

"Yeah, I know." Darcy stirred the Spanish rice that came with the enchiladas. "He'd forgive his brother for just about anything. But he made it clear, the one thing he won't ever tolerate is for Loki to hurt me or Jane."

"Why would Thor care?" He stabbed a fork full of enchilada, a slight frown on his mouth.

"Because Jane's his girlfriend, the love of his life, his sweet googley-moogley." *And I'm Jane's occasionally useful assistant.*

Sean winced and laughed at the same time. "Ugh. Do they really talk like that to each other?"

"Not in front of me, but they're in 'Lookout, here comes my lunch' love." The rice wasn't bad, but it needed salt. She eyed a salt shaker on the counter, several painful steps away, and sighed. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised that people assume I'd hook up with a guy who treats me like a punching bag. Leave it to stupid and glib Darcy, right?"

"You're not stupid," he stated bluntly, "and your flippancy is a defense mechanism."

She paused, a fork full of rice halfway to her mouth, flattered by his statement and discomforted by the weird realization that he reminded her of Loki. On the surface, they were as different as apples and hand grenades, Sean being a pleasant law-abiding CPA from northern California and Loki, an embittered, uber-powerful alien with a taste for world domination. But both were beautiful, almost fey, and completely emotionally unavailable. *Crap. Do I have a type?*

Back in the Fish Bowl, a couple hours later, Darcy caught herself watching Loki as he and Jane discussed the fabric of the universe or something along those lines. She couldn't hear them since, in lieu of her stolen iPod, she was listening to Internet radio. Besides, conversations between the two sounded like the adults on the old Peanuts cartoons: "Mwa-mwa-mwa, mwa."

Caught up in the intricacies of science-y stuff, Loki's face had a easy openness; at one point he tilted his head and smiled at Jane, then shook his head, and laughed, pointing at something on the printed sheet of data on the table before them. Darcy pulled her gaze away, and stared sightlessly at the screen before her, coincidentally the query interface where she was entering his equation. With an embarrassing spike of jealousy, she tried to remember if he ever smiled at her like that. Sneered, leered, smirked, sure, but an easy smile? Rarely.

*Why wouldn't he smile at Jane?* she thought. Jane had charmed the arrogant out of Thor. Though it might take longer, she'd probably find the sane in Loki. And why shouldn't he be drawn to Jane? She was brilliant and gorgeous, possessing a kind of elegant grace along with a touch of geeky awkwardness. Hell, if Darcy weren't totally straight, she'd jump Jane's bones.

*Darcy Lewis, on the other hand, is "crass" and "childish,"* she thought with more petulance than she'd like. She lifted her chin. *Yeah, well, Sean thinks I'm beautiful. And not-stupid.*

Nevertheless, she let her eyes wander to the far wall's glassy surface, where Jane and Loki's reflection doppelgangers bent their heads close, lost in all things astrophysics, and she felt a hard ache start in her stomach.

One thing was abundantly clear. Darcy had developed a serious crush on Loki.

## Chapter 5

### CHAPTER FIVE

Evening found the four in the living room, Loki actually present, though immersed in the last pages of *The Secret Life of Bees*. Darcy sat on opposite end of the couch from the grumpy god, reading *Esquire* magazine. Sure, it was technically a men's magazine, but as a huge fan of the gender, she figured she was definitely the publication's intended demographic. In addition to great articles and fun insight into the male mind, the magazine was chuck full of photos of gorgeous men.

Thor and Jane had commandeered the loveseat, as usual. Jane's attention was divided between a nature show on PBS and Thor, who was telling another Asgard story, probably in hopes of distracting Jane from the matter of long ago liaisons with other mortal women.

Thor's stories all followed the same narrative structure with him, Sif, The Warriors Three and Loki (and sometimes a small army) facing impossible odds and somehow prevailing in the end. Pretty much like the Battle of Thermopylae, only with the Spartans pulling a come-from-behind win in triple overtime. In this episode, Thor and company had launched an attack on a race of dark elves whose crime was having murdered some duke's mother's cousin's sister...or something. Darcy wasn't paying much attention.

At the point in the story where Loki usually help save the day with magic (and got absolutely no credit), when the unbeatable, super-high-hit-points, boss beastie arrived and started shooting lasers out its butt, Thor, Sif, and The Warriors Three were on their own, with just their shining armor, good looks and plus-50 sword skills.

"Uh, so where was Loki?" asked Darcy. The topic of the question looked up from his book, seemingly wondering the same thing.

"In Asgard." Thor looked at his brother. "Odin worried that the dark elves would use fell magic to launch a counterattack against Asgard. Loki's skills were needed at home." He shrugged. "Tis just as well. Loki has a tendency to argue for leniency against the enemy, and the dark elves needed to be crushed once and for all." He emphasized his point by pounding a fist on the chair's overstuffed arm. Something in the chair made an ominous crack and Jane sighed, probably calculating the cost of replacing more furniture.

Darcy started to point out that Loki and "leniency" weren't happy in the same zip code, much less a sentence, and then remembered that in Thor's stories, Loki often was the one who kept Thor from turning the enemies' homeland into a parking lot. Loki gave no response to Thor's comment, instead looking vaguely confused and then feigning disinterest.

At that point, the story wandered into unnecessary epilogues, with victory feasts and gloating, and Darcy went back to ogling the models in cologne and Breitling watch advertisements.

"And of course, Fandral was found soon after in the arms of an elf maiden." Thor smiled broadly in recollection. "A lovely little thing, pale by the standards of her kind, with eyes the color of a clear sky."

At this Loki stood and stalked across the room, pausing to hand the book back to Darcy and continuing out the front door into the night. Thor continued his story, accustomed to his not-brother's weird mood shifts.

Closing her hand around the book, Darcy could still feel the warmth of Loki's hand. On a stupid impulse, she set the book on the coffee table and rose painfully to her feet.

"You okay, Darcy?" asked Jane.

"Peachy. I just gotta move."

She opened the front door, not expecting to find him in sight, but rather already hiding in the nearby airplane cabin that she'd dubbed Loki's Lair.

Instead he sat on the edge of the porch, feet on the stairs, back to her. Just a few feet away, Inkblot crouched on his stool. At the sound of the opening door, the cat lifted his head, eyes mirror blue in the porch's light, and tensed, ready to flee. Seeing Darcy, he relaxed and went back to crunching daintily on his kitty kibble.

Closing the door behind her, she stopped, considering Loki for a moment. Then, resolute, she limped across the porch and eased herself down, one hand on his shoulder to steady herself. He flinched but didn't move away. Assuming that he wasn't completely revolted by her touch, she sat close and shifted her weight off her right hip, leaning against his side.

Together, they sat staring into the darkness, listening to the chirp of crickets, the distant sound of a dog barking, and the faint murmur of the neighbor's television. Little bats dove for insects in the porch's light, their shadows fluttering like dark butterflies on the ground. Heat still radiated off the stairs and porch below her, but a hint of cooler air brushed her face, a suggestion of upcoming fall.

After a time her need to "expound on whatever idea flitted though her head" got the better of her. She nudged him with an elbow. "Thor's stories are really boring when you aren't in them, huh?"

"That isn't why I left."

"Uh, then why?"

"Thor shouldn't make light of rape, particularly not in front of you...or Jane. It's unseemly."

Darcy squinted through her glasses into the night, then took them off and scrubbed at a smudge on the glass with her shirt. "You mean the elf and Fandral?" She'd only met the warrior once. He was smoking hot and emitted charisma like cheap cologne, Prince Charming personified. He struck her as the kind of guy who blew kisses at his own reflection in the mirror. Totally not her type, but then again, she wouldn't necessarily kick him out of her bed.

"Yes."

Replacing her glasses, she said, "Really? It sounded, um, consensual."

"It was hardly a matter of 'diddling the natives,' as you'd say. Her home had been razed, all in ruin; her father, brothers dead. I doubt she cared to reward her family's killers with her body."

"But it didn't look like rape to Thor." As the words left her mouth, she realized her mistake.

"Thor is an oaf." He turned, meeting her eyes. "If all you loved had been destroyed, and you were faced with...one such as myself, one you could never hope to resist, who demanded your attention, would you submit and bear the unbearable or would you fight?"

With his words and demeanor, he sloughed off the thin veneer of humanity, face preternaturally pale, hair pitch black. Reminded that he was much more than a cute guy in a costume, her heart

rate spiked with a rush of adrenaline. Unblinking, Darcy stared back. "I'd f-fight."

He regarded her for a long moment, one eyebrow canted just a bit higher than the other. Then he nodded and turned, his profile to her. "Yet, many in that position would chose to submit, hoping to survive another day and avoid further harm."

"Yeah, but," Darcy hugged her arms around herself, feeling a shiver up her spine, "if you don't fight back, you feel even dirtier...after. I'd rather have bruises and broken bones." Her statement made him focus on her again, his expression softer, though unreadable. Something passed between them, odd understanding perhaps, and her heart continued to race, though not entirely driven by fear.

"I could never hurt you, Darcy." He spoke the words with no inflection, as if he'd just noted that the sky was blue and water, wet. But his comment made her grow very still inside, frozen by confusion, her mind trying to parse a hidden meaning in the statement.

*Occam's Razor.* The obvious interpretation of "I could never hurt you" was "I could never hurt you because Thor would pound me into blood pudding with Mjölnir." That had to be it, because this was Loki, and what else could he mean?

She broke eye contact and studied the stairs, noting that the summer sun had already begun to chew up the paint. White flakes had started to peel on the corners. "What did Odin do to your brain? Why can't you remember stuff?"

Against her side, he flinched but didn't respond. The silence grew between them, filled by the nearby yipping of a coyote. *Our native trickster god speaks up for the silent Asgard version.* Her question had clearly triggered the return of sullen Loki.

He moved so fast that Darcy almost fell over at his sudden absence at her side. The faint hint of cinnamon touched her senses, and she realized he had teleported the short distance to the base of the stairs. With an imperious nod of his head, he said, "Come," and started toward the south side of the house.

Still sitting, she asked, "Where?"

Pausing, he looked at her and then started back in her direction. He nodded at the house. "The walls have ears." With another nod, he indicated the airplane cabin that sat on the south side of the house, under an old cottonwood tree.

"Oh." She nodded, understanding. One hand on the stair rail, she hauled herself up and waved him away. "I can do this." It wasn't that she resented his help. In fact, the one drawback to healing would be no more excuses to touch him. Darcy didn't consider herself an athlete, but she rode her bike or jogged several times a week and was used to feeling strong. Invalid didn't suit her. Unfortunately, it was an apt description, at least on stairs where her hip refused to hold her weight and she clung to the rail for support, each step an agony.

Loki dropped his chin toward his chest, and eyed her under dark brows. "You're going to hurt yourself needlessly in the service of stupid hubris."

"Says the guy who went postal on New York because of pride and hurt fee-fees."

The hard shadow of anger moved across his face, and he looked away, dragging his long fingers through black hair, pushing it back from his face. She watched his fists clench and unclench and wondered if she'd finally pushed him too far. His throat moved as he swallowed and he turned his gaze on her, grim expression replaced with a sad smile. "Then perhaps I should serve as an object

lesson, no?"

She returned his smile. "Okay. Fine. But no carrying." Because that much contact was quickly becoming a habit she couldn't quit. Unfortunately, he all too adroitly made the matter worse, when at the base of the stairs, he put her arm around his waist, and his around her shoulders. As they walked toward the airplane cabin, she thought rather ruefully that she fit much too comfortably against his side.

*He's not into you, and besides...supervillain.*

The old airplane cabin had the dubious distinction of being the only artifact in Stark's vast collection of crapola that was useful, first as the place where Darcy stored her bike and second, as Loki's Lair of Solitude. The first use necessitated by the fact that the garden shed, her bike's previous home, was full of Tony's more fragile junk, circuit boards and other delicate electronics. Her homeless bike had moved into the back of the airplane cabin about the time his lordship of mischief claimed it as his sulk spot. For the most part, that wasn't a problem because Darcy rode in the mornings, and Loki was the antithesis of morning person. One bonus to his claim on the space was that he had cast a spell that kept out spiders and other insects. Judging by his comment, he'd swept it of the other kind of bugs as well.

In its previous life, helping ferry humans across the sky, the cabin had been the first class section, the seating sparse and with generous leg room. Loki eased her down into an aisle seat two rows from the front and she quipped, "So will this flight have meal service? A movie?"

He stared down at her, face just inches from hers, hands on the arm rests on either side. In a Midwestern American accent, he drawled, "This is economy. You're lucky to get oxygen." Just a silhouette backlit by the watered-down porch light and a new moon, his face was obscured by the dark, but her brain filled in the details, sketching the lines of his jaw, the shape of his cheeks, his high forehead.

"Loki, made a funny." She laughed nervously.

He stepped back, and turned his attention to the floor, indecision in his tall frame. Then with a wave of his hand, and a swirl of glowing green mist, something appeared in his hand. He handed it to her and before she could stop herself, she took it.

Her fingers around what felt like a stem, she turned it and the weak light caught the many petals of a rose, black, no, not black, but deepest crimson. The remnants of his magic soaked into her skin and she smelled cinnamon.

She opened her mouth, a clever retort ready, but his gesture so disarmed her that all she could say was, "Uh." Her next attempt produce an "Erm." Clamping her mouth shut, she lifted the rose to her nose and sniffed, finding that it smelled like a rose, and hoping it wasn't going to make her sprout mouse whiskers or turn her face purple.

"Thanks," she managed.

He flopped down in the seat across the aisle, long legs sprawled. With a click, the seat reclined back and she could see his pale face staring skyward. "I'm just glad the spell produced a rose," he said, "and not a scorpion."

At that Darcy laughed. "Dude. I think that's my line."

With a tilt of his head, he looked at her, innocent expression seemingly saying, "Whatever do you

mean?"

"You dyed my hair purple."

"As I recall, the color suited you." He smirked. "Had it gone the way I intended, the color would have been orange."

"Orange? Are you serious?" He nodded. "Wow. I might've had to figure out a way to kill you for that." She smiled, thinking of Thor, the spell's collateral damage. "Can you imagine Thor with orange hair? Bozo the Clown God of Thunder."

Loki laughed, a genuine laugh and Darcy's breath caught in her throat. *Dude, you really need to stop being so adorable.* "Okay, so the hair wasn't so bad, but that coyote-lizard thing in the shower? Horrible."

"Twas just an illusion," he said with a satisfied smirk. "But you made the most delightful shriek."

"Oh, I-I--" She spluttered and scowled at him. "This is where not-crippled me marches off and gets my Taser. So, uh, just picture that: me leaving, returning with the Taser..." She studied his face. In the near darkness, it was difficult to tell, but he seemed to be leering. "And stop looking at my imaginary butt."

"That's like telling someone to look at the Grand Canyon and not admire the view."

"I'm not sure if that was a compliment or if you just said my ass was huge."

He lifted his hand, pressing his fingers to his forehead. "The books I've read have it right. Midgard's women are insane."

"Yes. Yes we are." She sniffed the rose again and felt a big silly grin taking over her face. What the hell was happening? He wasn't actually flirting with her? Had she been talking to an ordinary guy, she would've taken their banter for flirting. But even though the darkness erased the details of his black leather armor and boots, creating the impression of a pretty man in dark clothing, that voice--warm and velvety--was utterly Loki. Loki, master of all things mischief-y. *He's just messing with you, Darcy.*

"About your brain...did Odin break it...more?"

His hand moved, the seat reclined almost flat, and his face retreated farther into darkness. Somehow confident he would answer her question, she let him collect his thoughts and studied the rose. Even in the feeble light, it shone with a faint iridescence.

"Given what was done..." he begin, "the recollection of my punishment," the word spoken like curse, "is itself a tattered thing, a threadbare tapestry rent by claws of pain." Darcy squinted in the dark, wishing she could see his face better, but recognizing that he couldn't tell her the truth without the sheltering darkness.

His head moved and she felt his eyes on her. "Thor told you of what transpired in Odin's dungeons?" She nodded, and he continued, "And you saw the aftermath." A statement, but she nodded anyway, and a little shudder moved up her back. She had seen video of the attack on New York, watched the heartbreaking interviews of those who had lost their loved ones. When Thor hauled his bloodied, half-dead brother into the home she shared with Jane, Darcy's first emotion hadn't been pity, but grim satisfaction.

But now? She looked away, out into the cooling desert night. Lately, her mind had started to

partition him into separate Lokis: the sanity-and conscience-free version that saw her kind as insects, and the weird, but attractive guy, who sometimes threatened to turn her into a bug. The dichotomy, made her dizzy.

"A more generous, or perhaps creative storyteller might say my interactions with Odin, in his dungeon, were a kind of dialogue, where he postulated the thesis that recent events--on Asgard and here on Midgard--were a vast overreaction on my part."

Bringing her fist to her mouth, she coughed and said, "HeHadaPoint."

"Mmmm." One of his boots scraped on the cabin's weathered carpet as he set a foot flat on its surface. A second later, his heel began to tap lightly. Darcy grinned at the nervous human affectation. "I argued that my reactions, after lifetime of slights and recent revelations regarding my parentage, while cast in a measure of hyperbole, were hardly...unreasonable."

Darcy considered pointing out that "unreasonable" was throwing a hissy fit at Macy's customer service counter when that bitch of a saleslady won't refund your money on a pair of shoes that had only been worn once (or twice, or thrice, who's keeping count?). Inviting several thousand of your best alien buddies and their pet whale dragons to a major metropolitan area was a tad more than unreasonable. But Loki seemed in the midst of something that could be mistaken for honesty, so instead she said, "I don't think you won that argument."

"No, though I refused to concede his point." Lifting his hand to his face, he waved it in front of his left eye. With a frustrated sigh, he dropped his hand. "Odin's last salvo, before Thor's ill-conceived rescue, was the extraction of all my memories of things positive. The good, the happy, all recollection of success, pleasure, any of the points of pride in my life."

Darcy felt her jaw drop toward her chest. "Crap! You mean he took your memories of nice things? How is that not supposed to make you...crazier?"

"He said, 'Stupid, boy. You seize each slight, real or imagined, and take it deep within the angry hearth of your heart, to forge yet another aspect of the armor that shields you from the beauty, the love that surrounds you. If it's the bleak, the miserable, that you crave, then that's what you shall have.'"

"That's horrible."

Light moved on dark leather as he shrugged, but even in the dim light she could tell the gesture was forced. "It's an imperfect process, the amputation of memories. The good and bad, dark and light, are often inextricably bound. To excise the dark, he was forced to leave some light, some good left so as to retain the bad. The result an incomplete history of misery, punctuated by tantalizing fragments of hope."

Darcy blinked, an upwelling of hurt moving in her chest. For someone who did her best to live in the now, walling away any unhappy memories of the past, the thought of being trapped in her head with nothing but the ugly, struck a painful chord. Looking away, she surreptitiously wiped away the beginning of tears. *Talk, Darcy. Do what you do best, before you start blubbering like a fool.* "And for Loki, 'success' plus 'happiness' equals 'magic.' Right?"

"The truth, expressed in an equation. I think I may be in love," he said dryly. "And therein lies the genius of Odin's spellwork. He left me bereft of not only the happy things in life, but the very element that defines me."

She turned to him, hoping the darkness hid any signs of tears. "But you have done magic." Even



though Thor's deal with SHIELD technically prohibited any magic. "My hair, laundry, the thing in the shower, this rose, the snakes in my closet."

"Ah, the snakes, another failure." It turned out Darcy wasn't afraid of snakes, and besides, they glowed prettily. "Inconsequential magic, stupid cantrips and feeble illusions." His tone was light, but his knuckles white as he clenched his fists on the armrest.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be." He moved the seat upright and then pulled down the tray before him, moving it up and down, taking an odd interest in its workings. "It wasn't your doing."

Covering her mouth to hide her smile, Darcy thought, *Loki in honesty-mode is a total spazz*. "You've learned a lot, working with Jane. That helps, doesn't it?"

"No." He shoved the tray down so hard it squeaked. Setting his elbows on the tray, he clenched one hand over the other, knuckles again white. "With mathematics and magic, there are often multiple solutions to the same problem, correct?"

"Sure."

Loki turned, looking at her, green eyes black in the poor light. "Some solutions are much more elegant, and in the case of magic, more efficient, requiring significantly less resources." He fell silent and Darcy realized he was waiting for her to figure something out.

She ran her tongue over her teeth, uncomfortable, feeling he was giving her way too much credit. *Math. Magic. Darcy. Right*. Then it came to her. "There are better ways to do magic. That use less, uh, fuel...energy. You're running like a HUMVEE, when you used to be a speedy, efficient sportster."

"A distressingly apt analogy. I'm using magic as I did as a child, clumsy and tiring." His foot was tapping again, and Darcy decided that was Loki's tell, the clue that he was telling the truth. "The discovery of more efficient pathways to magic is a time-consuming process."

"Does Thor know?"

"Unfortunately, yes. He's thick as a plank, but he's known me far too long not to notice my...lapses."

In the rare position of having nothing to say, Darcy went back to her contemplation of the rose--if it really was a rose--and wondering what creepy thing it might morph into. A tight knot that wasn't her embarrassing crush on Loki, grew in her stomach. Well, that was still there too, but with a little reflection, she knew that his admission just now, had some significance. By herself, she, Darcy Lewis, totally ordinary mortal whose only superpower was snark, posed no threat to him, even in his weakened state. *Knowledge is power*. By telling her about his diminished magical abilities, he'd given her a form of power over him.

Or, maybe she was reading too much into the matter. Like everyone else, he probably didn't take her seriously enough to see her as a threat.

When she look his way, she found him watching her. "Um, I've got a long day tomorrow as Database Queen of the Fish Bowl," she said. He nodded and moved to help her and they went back in the house.

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Thor and Jane had already disappeared, the former probably to face a grilling from the latter. Darcy felt a little twinge of relief at this, since Loki still had an arm around her when they walked into the house. He released her and she said, "Thanks again for the rose."

He nodded, said, "Goodnight," and turned for his room. To keep herself from watching him (and checking out his ass) she made for the kitchen. There, she started opening cabinets, searching.

There were no vases in the cabinets, so she used one of Thor's drinking glasses, from a set that Jane had bought him. They were tall and made of thick glass. The words Arrogant Bastard Ale were printed in red on the glass along with the image of a gargoyle hefting a beer stein.

Just as she was setting the rose in water, Thor wandered into the kitchen, his jeans and plaid shirt swapped for sweats and a fitted T-shirt. He started for the fridge but then came to an almost cartoon-like screeching halt, his attention on what she held in her hand.

She gave him an apologetic grin. "Sorry. We don't have a vase."

But Thor's attention wasn't on the glass, but the flower. "Where did you get that rose?"

"Loki gave it to me."

"Loki?" He spoke the name as though he'd never heard it before.

"Loh-kee," she pronounced slowly. "Your brother? Black hair, green eyes, about 6'3"? The brains to your brawn? Last seen leading an alien army against you and the Avengers?"

"Aye. That Loki, I've met." He smiled, blue eyes on the rose. "The one that gives Frigga's roses to mortals? We aren't acquainted."

"Whose roses?"

"Frigga. My mother." He moved to stand before her and closed his thumb and forefinger on the stem. "This is from the palace garden, Frigga's creation." Turning the rose, he pointed at three exterior petals that stuck out an angle, breaking the flower's otherwise flawless shape. "These petals are the variety's unique trait. She says they are to remind us that even the gods aren't perfect."

"Wow. An Asgard rose." Darcy gave the beer glass a sad smile. "It really does deserve a nice vase."

Thor smiled and brushed his big fingers over the petals. "Tis rather remarkable. I wonder if he could conjure one for me for Jane."

Darcy laughed. "Well, we're assuming it's really a rose. It may be a trick. By morning it will have turned into a giant moth, eaten all my clothes and pooped on the carpet."

Back in her room, she set the rose on the nightstand closest to the window. As she fell asleep, the last image in her mind was of it in the faint moonlight, tiny specks of light glittering like pixie dust on the petals.

## Chapter 6

### CHAPTER SIX

In the morning, Loki's rose was still a rose.

The sunlight, filtered through Venetian blinds, brought out the flower's strange iridescence, deepest crimson that shifted to magenta and indigo as Darcy spun the beer glass slowly on the nightstand.

Still a touch paranoid, she scooped her glasses from the nightstand, put them on and looked across the room at the oak dresser. Darcy Lewis, long chestnut brown hair and blue eyes, stared back at her from the dresser's mirror. Pushing back the bedcovers, she gave herself a quick once over, seeing two arms, two legs, and all the usual human anatomy. Her room was as she remembered it, yesterday's clothes half-in, half-out of the laundry hamper, a small pile of mail on her desk, iPod still missing from its spot on the dresser.

As she left for the bathroom, she paused and gave the rose a stern look. "Behave."

Her bruises were shifting to the psychedelic phase, hideous reddish purple had softened to shades of lighter purple, brown and yellow, but her hip no longer felt like it was one sad ligament from popping out of joint. Her knee had an ugly scab, the kind a ten-year-old boy would proudly show to everyone in his time zone, but the swelling had gone down. And when she returned to her room, the rose still sat obediently on the nightstand.

As she and the gang left for work, the day continued to feel hopeful. Once again, no dead bodies on the porch. The morning sky held the promise, or, this being the desert, the false hope, of rain. Clouds, dark pastel purple and blue, edged with fluorescent pink by the rising sun, covered the sky in a patchy mass. A desert cottontail rabbit grazed on a patch of grass that had survived the summer heat shaded by the airplane cabin. After Loki helped her down the stairs, she gave the guys in the black SUV a wave and surprisingly both waved back.

Jane and Thor rode in silence, but the tension between them had dissipated. Loki pulled a magazine from beneath his clothing, one of her *Esquires*, and started to flip through the pages.

"What else does an exiled god carry in his armor besides a library?" asked Darcy. "My iPod?"

"Your iPod?" He met her eyes, expression completely baffled, the consummate innocent. "Have you lost it again?"

"Yeah. To a sticky-fingered god."

"Thor?" With a tilt of his head, he blinked wide-eyed, confused. "But he has Jane's iPad."

"Uh-huh, and why don't you steal her stuff?" *Because you like Jane?* "Her iPad has music that you'd actually enjoy, sophisticated stuff: jazz, classical, opera. A guy like you should be all about opera. Fat ladies in Viking helmets."

Thor turned his head and asked Darcy, "Fat ladies? Viking helmets?"

"She means Wagner, the Ring Cycle," explained Loki. "And I find opera overblown and melodramatic. Dialogue is meant to be spoken, not sung."

"I want my iPod back. If you don't return it by this evening, I'll, I'll-" She licked her lips, and

scowled at his condescending smirk. *I'll what? Hold my breath till I turn blue?* "I'll do this all the way to work." She pointed extended her index and middle fingers together and poked him in the shoulder, again and again.

"Don't touch me," he grumbled.

Jane gave Thor a quick imploring look. "We can't leave them by the side of the road, right? Because of the spell that binds you two?"

Thor shook his head sadly, then he brightened. "Perhaps they could ride with the guards." He pointed backwards with a thumb.

"Poke, poke, poke," said Darcy.

"Enough." Loki grabbed her hand. "There's a remote possibility I may be able to locate your missing property."

"Behold the power of 'childish,'" she said smugly.

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At work, the entourage of assault rifle-toting guards that accompanied them into the building and down to the Fish Bowl were as surly as ever, but the guard on the floor, Mike, was cheerful. Well, cheerful for a SHIELD guard, meaning he nodded politely at Jane, Darcy and Thor, and didn't glower at Loki. Mike was subbing for Max who had called in sick. Darcy felt a touch of relief at Max's absence, since arriving at work, tucked against Loki's side, his arm around her, felt even more intimate than being carried.

Certain that karma was totally in her camp, Darcy decided to take care of a loose end. After a few emails and time spent online looking up contracts, she hit Save and Print.

The Fish Bowl was quieter today, Thor done with his Angry Birds obsession and blessedly silent. The god of thunder didn't come with a mute button, but his recent invitation to join the Avengers/SHIELD fantasy football league had done the trick. He'd spent the morning hunched over the iPad, messaging Tony Stark and Clint Barton, and studying players' statistics with a studiousness that was almost Loki-esque.

Loki and Jane sat on the opposite side of the table, in dueling scientist mode, arguing about something on several printed graphs. His green eyes sparkled with intensity, face animated by the discussion, and Darcy winced at the now too-familiar spike of jealousy. She glanced at her hand, expecting it to be green as The Hulk.

"I need your signature, *El Jefe*," she said, plopping the papers down on top of the graphs.

Jane blinked, startled. "Wh-what is this?"

"A rental contract."

Pushing a stray lock of brown hair behind her ear, Jane started to page through the document. "Tony Stark...property..." A broad smile split her face. "We're charging him rent for his junk."

"Uh-huh." Darcy smiled back. "I cleared it with Pepper this morning. She said, 'Write up a contract, and I'll have you a check by next week.' I found a template online and modified it."

"And do you charge SHIELD rent for Thor's and my upkeep?" asked Loki.

"He drew the line on rent, but I get compensated for groceries and 'miscellaneous expenses.'"

"You do?" Thor had paused in his study of quarterbacks and defensive linemen. "Clint complains that Fury is," he paused, blue eyes going blank as he searched his memory, "'So cheap, he wouldn't pay for his mother's hip replacement.'"

The first time Darcy put in a reimbursement request for groceries, it came back rejected the next day. She immediately sent it back, this time routed through Fury's office. Then she proceeded to call, email, and drop by the office several times a day, asking for the request's status. When Fury blocked her email, she started spamming him through multiple accounts. After about a week, he sent the request back with a note: "From now on, please submit your reimbursement requests to accounting where they will be approved immediately." Sean, who'd already processed some of her requests on the sly (new iPod, expensed out as "portable storage device"), cheerfully complied.

"Tell Clint to send me his receipts for bows and arrows and stuff. I'll have Sean write it off as 'Loki attitude adjusters.'" The subject of her barb had gone back to the graphs and ignored her. Darcy grinned, certain nothing could ruin her great day.

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At two in the afternoon, the door chimed and Nick Fury walked into the lab, and all Darcy's good karma evaporated faster than rain in the desert.

Just before Fury arrived, Darcy had been working, fingers tappa-tapping as she imported the latest dataset. Thor sat at the end of the work table, trying to explain football to Loki, also at the table, a chair between himself and Thor. "It's like a battle," said Thor, "made up of tiny skirmishes, broken by short truces, the victor being the one who gains the most territory."

Loki's jaw moved, his shoulders rose with a deep breath, and Darcy sighed, expecting him to call his brother a horse's ass. Instead, showing unusual restraint, Loki picked up a pen and went back to making notes about the graphs spread on the table before him.

Jane, meanwhile, worked at her computer, writing up her latest findings, head bobbing with whatever she listened to on Internet radio.

Fury was alone, but he was giving off enough vibes for twelve angry men. Sweeping the room with his one-eyed glare, he marched over and sat across from Loki, who watched him with the usual disinterest. Turning to Darcy, he said, "We need to talk," and beckon her over with a jerk of his head.

"It's not me, it's you," quipped Darcy, pushing herself to her feet.

Jane stood, removing her earbuds, obviously confused. "What's going on?"

Fury didn't answer her; instead he pointed at the seat next to Loki, and said to Darcy, "Sit."

"Woof," replied Darcy, easing herself into the chair. Fury, still ignoring Jane and Thor, leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms over his chest and studied Darcy and Loki as though he were a high school principal and they were two teens who'd been caught having sex under the stadium bleachers. As unfazed as ever, Loki spun a pen between his fingers so fast it made a whirring sound.

Loki and the SHIELD director, both swathed in black leather, stared at each other across the table and Darcy thought, *This must be what a Harley Davidson bikers' convention smells like*. Refusing to be intimidated, she sat up straight in her chair, her mouth a hard line.

"That's magic," growled Fury, regarding the spinning pen. "That's a no-no."

"Actually," replied Loki, "It's simple dexterity." With a twist of his wrist, he stopped the pen's movement and then set it on the table.

"Is there a problem?" asked Thor, mildly, although his expression suggested he was annoyed by Fury's behavior. His recent lessons in humility aside, he was still a prince of Asgard and not accustomed to being treated like a background prop.

"Max Padilla is dead."

Jane made a little gasp and Darcy said, "No. I mean, he was fine...yesterday."

"How?" asked Thor, his blue eyes narrow with suspicion.

"Guess," said Fury, fierce gaze moving from Loki to Darcy.

At this, Loki rolled his eyes. "Obviously, the guard met the same frigid end as his comrade. If your game is to pretend to lay the blame with me, do it. But leave the girl out of this. You know she's no killer and the guard was her friend."

Darcy lifted an eyebrow and eyed Loki. Her mind, though reeling with the shock of Max's death, still realized that this was the most she'd ever seen Loki speak to anyone who wasn't her or Jane.

"What I know is that Max stopped by my office yesterday, concerned about your relationship with Ms. Lewis."

Remembering her conversation with Max, Darcy's stomach clenched, and stupid tears threatened to spill from her eyes. She stared at the table, and with her finger, traced the waves made by the data.

"Relationship?" Loki asked, his tone bored.

Thor stood, his attention on Fury. "I can assure you, Loki's done naught to besmirch Darcy's honor."

A little snicker escaped Darcy's mouth, pushing through her grief, driven by Thor's words. "Dude. 'Honor?' *Really?*" Though the details escaped her in the light of day, she was pretty sure she'd had a naughty dream about Loki last night, so her subconscious's honor was already in tatters.

"Max said Darcy's bruises were your doing," stated Fury, still not acknowledging the indignant god of thunder who loomed above him.

"No," said Darcy.

"Really?" Fury unfolded his arms and leaned forward, pointing at the finger-shaped bruises on Darcy's left arm. "So who did that? Your cat?"

"I did," admitted Loki. "Had I meant her harm, she'd sport more than a few faint marks. I'm unaccustomed to dealing with mortals in a friendly manner. It was a miscalculation." He turned his gaze on Darcy. "It won't happen again."

Biting her lower lip, she glanced at Fury and back at Loki. Did he mean "no touching, ever?" because that would suck. "I'm not fragile," she said. "Just don't be so grabby."

"You're implying that because Max came to you with his concerns, that Loki killed him?" said Jane, who now stood at Thor's side.

"It's an interesting coincidence," observed Fury. "A lot like this." He reached into his black leather jacket. With a crinkle of plastic, he set an item on the table before them. "That was found with Max's body."

Poker wasn't Darcy's game, and her wide-eyed, jaw agape reaction confirmed this fact. Loki, of course, tilted his head, eyes on the thing briefly before favoring Fury with an expression so guileless, that Darcy expected a golden halo to pop up over his head.

The thing on the table was a rose, darkest red, the suggestion of iridescence obvious despite the plastic surrounding it.

"Look familiar?" Fury's expression was almost smug.

Under the table, she felt a sudden pressure against the side of her foot. Loki's boot, pressing on her running shoe; signaling her to do, what? "It's a rose," she said. Did Loki want her to lie?

Fury nodded. "Uh-huh. And?"

"It's red?" she tried, still not sure what Loki wanted her to do.

A muscle in Fury's jaw twitched under chocolate brown skin and he stared at her. Darcy returned his stare, knowing full well she would be the one to break. Silence wasn't her strong suit.

"Loki gave you a rose last night."

Loki's foot still hard against hers, she said nothing. Just when she thought she'd explode, Fury rolled his eye upward and said, "Look, I know he gave you a rose just like this one. I know Thor confirmed it was from Asgard, one of his mother's."

At this Loki nodded to Jane, who shook her head, exasperated. "I knew it!" she said angrily.

Darcy smiled at Fury's forced admission. The electronic bugs in the trailer had been there long *before* the arrival of Thor and Loki. Darcy found the first one under the coffee table during a rare bout of housecleaning. When Jane showed it to Fury, he claimed ignorance and had a team sweep the house of additional devices. Two weeks later, Jane found another in a kitchen cabinet. After that, Erik discovered one under the kitchen sink. Each time, Fury denied any SHIELD involvement. Nowadays, whenever anyone found a bug, they dumped it in the garbage disposal, hoping whoever listened got an earful of crunching noise. To Jane, the bugs were just another sign that she still wasn't fully accepted, that no matter what she did, SHIELD didn't respect or trust her.

"That's not my rose," stated Darcy.

"Yeah," said Fury. "How do you know?"

"Um, technically, that's not even one of Frigga's roses. It's too perfect." The plastic crackled as she lifted it by the stem. "Frigga's roses have three petals that stick out. This one doesn't. But you know that."

"But it sure as shit isn't a normal rose," replied Fury. "So where did it come from?"

Loki reached for the rose, his hand brushing hers. She released it, but then put her hand lightly over his, her fingers reaching just an inch beyond his fingertips, touching the stem. "Ow! That's worse than the porch," she said. With her other hand, she rubbed her tingling fingers, licking her lips at the hint of cinnamon.

"So what are we dealing with here?" asked Fury, his dark gaze going between both Loki and her.

"I don't know," said Loki, the familiar expressionless mask on his face.

"As your girl here said a couple night's ago, 'You're all about magic.'"

Darcy opened her mouth, but Loki cut her off. "She's no one's girl but her own, and you know full well that my memories are impaired." Darcy noticed he said memories, but not magic.

"So you say."

"So you've heard via the listening devices that intrude on Darcy and Jane's privacy."

"I'm not letting you play house without keeping an eye and several ears on you."

"The house was bugged before he moved in," muttered Jane, bitterly.

Fury darted a quick look at Jane, but returned his focus to Loki. "If you didn't do it, tell me who did."

"I don't know." A furrow started to grow between his dark brows, and Darcy could see a bright flare of anger in his emerald eyes.

"I don't believe you."

"I'm crushed," sneered Loki.

"What you're going to be," said Fury, "is in a holding cell, comfy cozy with your *beloved* brother."

"But you don't think he did it," protested Darcy.

"It doesn't matter what I think." Leaning back, Fury heaved a sigh and stared at the ceiling. "Word is going to get out, how these men died. And when it does--"

"Then perhaps one of your people might stumble, by pure chance, certainly not intellect, upon a way to kill me," said Loki. "That would eliminate your problem once and for all, would it not?"

"I'd wear a pretty red dress to your funeral and dance on your grave," replied Fury. "But the real killer would still be on the loose. Besides, if someone comes after you, there could be collateral damage." He defined the term by looking at Darcy and Jane.

"They will have to come through me," said Thor, confidently.

"Yeah, and what happens if you're not around, when you've got Avengers business?" Fury pointed at Darcy. "Or when she heads off on her own to Santa Fe or Albuquerque?"

"Where was the man's body found?" asked Loki, through a clenched jaw.

"At home. His landlord stopped by to fix the swamp cooler; found Max in the living room, that rose on his chest. The landlord called 911. We got the body back from the local coroner, cooked up the usual bullshit stories, but that won't stop folks from talking. A man frozen like a popsicle, no sign of forced entry, nothing stolen. It's what urban legends are much of."

Darcy shuddered at the image. Max was a New Mexico native, born and raised in Farmington. He lived off-base, in the same tiny apartment complex where Andy had lived because it made it easier to have friends and family over for a visit.



"Whoever killed Max and Andy left some kind of magical signature all over that rose, right?" Fury asked Loki.

Loki nodded, expression cold, the lines of his face extra angular. "As I told Darcy, it's familiar, but I can't remember why...or what."

Fury nodded, though there was a measure of disbelief in his eyes. Rising, he picked up the rose, and returned it to the folds of his black leather jacket. "I'd suggest you find a way to jog your memory, and quick," he said to Loki, earning a withering glare that would make a weaker man wet his underoos. Nick Fury, however, merely took a hold of his lapels and gave them a snap, straightening the jacket.

Darcy sniffed, detecting a sudden scent of cinnamon, a charred, pissed-off version of the spice. Loki was staring at Fury with an expression that was one maniacal cackle away from enraged supervillain. The SHIELD director wasn't on Darcy's top ten list of favorite people, but she didn't want to see Loki rip him limb for limb. She shifted her foot, and stomped on Loki's boot. *Chill out!*

"In other words," she said to Fury, "you're clueless."

But Fury kept his attention on Loki, feet wide apart, posture practically vibrating with challenge, daring him to try something. And obviously, after six months of good behavior, Loki had a shit-ton of pent-up frustration to spare. Even without her foot touching his, she could feel the sizzle of energy emanating from his body.

"Loki," said Thor.

Darcy met Thor's eyes, seeing both desperation and grim determination. Turning to Loki, she said, "Hey, Mad Science, you're smarter than this." With a slight hesitation, where she wondered if his vow not to hurt her mattered when he was about to melt down like Fukushima, she reached for his hand.

Skin to skin, power roared up her arm, hot and boiling, it surged into her body, consumed her, and surrounded her in suffocating heat. It was simultaneously like sticking a finger in a light socket and being stuck in an oven with burning apple pie. She felt herself falling sideways away from him, until stopped by big hands on her shoulders.

"Darcy," said Thor's voice in her ear. "Are you well?"

"Th-that, that was a rush," she answered weakly, panting from the heat that was already dissipating.

Loki stared at her, eyes wide, startled. He blinked away the emotion and muttered, "Foolish girl." Eyes narrowed, he glowered at Fury, but most of the tension had fled his body.

Darcy straightened and patted Thor's hand on her shoulder. Because sass was the only refuge after everything that just happened, she lifted her eyebrows and studied Fury. "If you two are done dick fencing, maybe you should go solve a murder."

To her surprise, Fury grinned and shook his head. Without another word, he turned and left the lab.

Darcy slumped in her seat, letting out a loud sigh. "We really need to find you a hobby." She nudged Loki with an elbow.

Loki gave her a quick glance, looking briefly sheepish.

"You sure you're all right, Darcy?" ask Jane. Darcy started to answer yes, but her eyes strayed to the spot where the rose had been, a tiny tremor moving through her body.

Max was gone. Former Special Forces, he'd seen action in Iraq and Afghanistan and returned home without a scratch, at least not physically. Like a lot of veterans, he carried his scars on the inside. He'd been to hell and back and survived only be killed by some freak with magic in his living room.

Darcy raked her fingers through her hair. She knew that Max's concern for her wasn't entirely brotherly, that he was circling the idea of asking her out. She might have said yes.

"I'm okay." Clenching her fists, she did what she always did, pushing the bad into a forgotten corner of her brain with a mental broom. Except this time, a few tears were shoved out in the process.

Jane gave her an awkward hug. "No, you're not. We're going home early."

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Darcy's glasses dug into the bridge of her nose, driven by the force of thunking her forehead against the SUV's window. She took them off and slumped against the door, eyes closed, hoping the movement of the vehicle would lull her into blissful oblivion.

Unfortunately, over the course of the morning, the sun had won the battle with the clouds and was shining triumphantly through the windows, hot on her face and blazing orange behind her eyelids.

Leaning back into the seat, she tugged at the seatbelt, loosening it and letting it snap back. Snap, snap, snap. The seat belt mechanism squeaked every time she pulled.

"If you cease that irritating noise, I promise you'll have your precious iPod as soon as we get home," said Loki. He was reading a thick paperback. Without her glasses, she couldn't see the title, but it looked brand new.

She stuck her tongue out at him, but stopped playing with the seatbelt.

A couple minutes later, she said, "Jane, Mad Science. With your science and his mojo, could you two make a magic detector?"

Loki kept reading, but Jane glanced at her in the rearview mirror. "Did you say 'magic detector?'"

"A magic detector. Like a metal detector, but not as big, or obvious."

"I don't know." She shot Loki a glance in the mirror. "Could we?" Before he could answer, she asked, "Why?"

"Because whoever killed Andy and Max," a hard lump tightened her throat and she took a breath, "must have left traces of magic all over the apartment complex. Maybe other places too. With the right gadget, maybe I could track down the murderer."

"You?" said Jane. "Why you?"

"Because Mad Science won't go anywhere except work." And even if he did, his refusal to wear regular clothing would make him a high-profile sidekick. In jeans and a T-shirt, he might be mistaken for a young man going through a Goth phase. In Asgard clothing, even with shorter hair, he was the sneering d-wad who destroyed Manhattan. "Which means Thor can't go anywhere

either, and you won't leave the boys home alone." She forced a brave smile. "So it's up to Darcy to save the day."

*Because that's what I do*, Darcy thought. When Jane came undone after the arrival of Thor and Loki, and rapid exit of Erik, it was Darcy who made sure all the utility bills got paid. When the household needed groceries or supplies, Darcy made the trek to Santa Fe, usually alone. She didn't mind making the trip. It gave her an excuse to visit college friends, but nevertheless, she'd turned into their de facto quartermaster.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Darcy," said Thor. "It could be dangerous. Nick Fury was right. You could be targeted."

"Right," replied Darcy, "Fury, the guy whose only plan is 'Blame Loki.'" She pulled and snapped the seatbelt again, getting Loki's attention. "So could you do it? A magic detector that would pick up the killer's magical signature?"

"Possibly," he said slowly.

"I don't think you should encourage her, brother," chided Thor.

"I'm not your brother," he replied, distractedly, his mind apparently already at work on the problem. Darcy smiled, though this small triumph didn't ease the pain in her heart.

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She thought she was okay until they reached to top stair and her gaze turned to the spot where Andy had been. Except in her mind's eye, she saw Max's face. Her knees turned to Jello, and Loki's grip on her shoulders tightened.

"I'm going to my room," she announced once they were inside and he stayed at her side, arm over her shoulders. He started to help her towards the bed, but she wiggled free. "I'm good, thanks."

She met his eyes. A rush of resentment burned in her belly and she looked away, focusing on the cheerful paintings of sunflowers over her bed. Andy and Max's deaths were his fault. He was a killer too. If he hadn't attacked New York, there wouldn't be some psycho out there gunning for revenge. She set her glasses and purse on the desk and rubbed her eyes.

No, that wasn't right. Not exactly. Whatever Loki had done, however horrible, none of it justified the killer's actions.

When she looked at him again, he was staring at some point on the floor, eyes distant. Harmless? Dangerous? Did he feel remorse? Taking a step back, her head reeled and she swayed, unbalanced.

"You're in shock. You need rest." His hands were on her upper arms; she stared bleary-eyed at his chest, at the overlapping layers of leather and cloth and wondered how the hell he got dressed in the morning. Magic, probably.

It started as a strangled hiccup, then another, and then an outright sob. *No. No crying!* Except she wasn't good at taking orders, not even from herself. At the third sob, she tried to turn away, but he pulled her to him, and she gave up and slumped against his chest. He smelled good, leather and vaguely cinnamon-y and male, and she wrapped her arms around his waist, fingernails digging into leather at his back. Holding her breath, she made one last valiant attempt not to cry, which would have worked perfectly if she didn't need to breathe. When her body's demand for oxygen won, two sobs snuck in with a breath and then she couldn't stop.

She cried for Max and Andy, but she suspect that other hurts, old pains, slipped free as well. All the times when she'd been invisible, for every time her opinions were brushed aside because they came from Darcy, for every time her flippant armor worked a little too well. He stroked his hand over her head, running his fingers down the length of her hair, and she cried because kindness from Loki of all people left her feeling raw and vulnerable.

A male voice said something, and through a haze of tears she saw Thor, a fuzzy golden mass in the doorway. Loki didn't answer, but a second later, the door slammed in his brother's face. It would have been darkly funny, if she wasn't also embarrassed to be caught blubbering, leaving a wet, snotty mess on Loki's fancy Asgard clothes.

Eventually, mild mortification started to replace misery and with a few hiccuping breaths, she got herself under control. She didn't resist when he moved her to the bed and sat her down, although she eyed the closed door and hoped he wouldn't try to take advantage of the situation. Mostly because she'd totally let him, but in the depths of her grief-addled mind, she knew that would be filed under Some of the Stupider Things Darcy's Done.

Instead, he bent down and started to untie her left shoe. She'd never seen anything on him that didn't involve buckles or straps, but after just a few seconds, his long fingers easily worked the laces. Sunlight from the window hit his hair, and it gleamed blue black like a raven's wings. He still needed a decent haircut. Watching him crouched at her feet, she felt more confused than ever, sensing a shifting undercurrent. Something had changed between them, though she didn't know what.

"Isn't untying shoelaces beneath your station, or something, Prince of Asgard?"

"It plumbs the depths of 'beneath,'" he said, moving on to her other foot. "But I imagine my station, what remains of it, can bear the disgrace of a tangle with a few laces."

When he was done, he stood, one hand briefly on her knee and stared down at her. "The rest, " he panned a look over her, expression disinterested but still pausing on her breasts, "you can manage."

"Yeah, because 'honor,'" she said with snort, glancing at the closed door.

"Maybe," he said, turning to the window and shutting the blinds with a casual wave of fingers, "It's *my* honor that's been damaged."

"Yeah," Darcy said, "I'll make a man of you yet." The comment might have worked better if heat didn't instantly rise to her face. She flopped over sideways and buried her blush in a pillow. A few seconds later, the door clicked open and shut and he was gone.

Exhausted, she fell asleep almost immediately.

## Chapter 7

### CHAPTER SEVEN

Darcy woke in darkness, with the disoriented sense of being thrown out of time. Squinting, she made out the numbers 8:30 on the clock radio. When she switched on the lamp, a scary face stared at her from the dresser's mirror.

"Yikes!" Mascara, smeared by her crying jag, made a ghastly black mess under her eyes. "'Waterproof,' my shiny white ass." Rubbing the mess with her fingers just made it worse. Trying not to think about the fact that Loki had seen her looking like an extra from *The Walking Dead*, she got up and limped to her door. She cracked the door open and peered out the opening. A light was on, probably in the kitchen, but she heard no voices.

In the bathroom, she scrubbed her face, and studied the result. Even with eyes still red from crying, and mussed hair, the girl who stared back was pretty enough. She wasn't given to conceit, but she knew luck had favored her in the looks department. Which made the dull knife of insecurity that sawed at her insides all the more irritating.

She couldn't just get a crush on some random human bad boy: a cute bank robber, or a jewel thief who'd bring her diamonds. No, Darcy Lewis had to fall for an ancient being, a god who'd probably divorced his conscience several hundred years ago, and had recently split up with his sanity as well. Giving herself two thumbs up in the mirror, she said, "Way to go, Darcy," before heading for the kitchen to face whoever was still up.

The kitchen table was covered in paper: graphs, drawings, hastily scrawled equations, and a couple of scientific journals. Jane sat at the table, scrolling through something on her iPad with her right hand, her left twirling the end of her ponytail.

"Stand back, she's making science," said Darcy.

Jane smiled wearily. "You feeling better?"

Grateful that Jane didn't mention the whole weeping and wailing thing, she nodded. "Much."

"We got pizzas from Marcello's and I managed to save a few slices from the eating machine," she said, meaning Thor. "They're in the fridge."

"Where are the Wonder Twins?"

"Loki's outside in his lair and Thor went to bed." She smiled fondly. "Too much excitement today."

Darcy pursed her lips, holding back the observation that Thor had probably strained brain muscles on the prolonged mental effort of putting together a fantasy football team. Unlike Loki, Darcy didn't think Thor was stupid, but his approach to life was straightforward: If you can't charm it with your smile and good looks, beat it into submission with a hammer or zap it with lightning.

After she heated the pizza in the microwave, Darcy sat at the table and ate, she and Jane enjoying the companionable silence. As she rose to leave for bed, her eye caught something in the pile of papers. With a grin, she bent and gave Jane a quick hug. "You're so cute," she said, pointing at a little doodled heart that surrounded a name, Thor.

Jane hid her face in her hands. "I'm twelve."

Smiling, Darcy limped toward her room. Behind her, the front door opened and closed. "Lock the door," she said, not glancing back.

Heavy footfalls followed her and she resisted the urge to turn around.

"Darcy," he said and she gave up and turned, one hand on the wall.

In the narrow hallway, he seemed even taller, a regal prince utterly out of place in a shabby house trailer. "Give me your hand," he said.

"If you used the word 'please,' would your head explode?"

"If you weren't insufferably impudent, would yours?" he countered. "Your. Hand."

"Why?" she asked warily.

"Because I have a lovely scorpion for you."

"I'd prefer one of those glowing snake things." But she held out her hand. Something cool and metallic touched her palm. His warm hand curled her fingers over it, and the rubbery length of earbuds fell from her hand.

"My iPod!" Just as quickly, she held her hand far from her body, studying the music player as though it really were a scorpion. "What'd you do to it?" Looking up, she saw his face and shook her head. "Oh-no, not the innocent expression. If I listen to music, it'll make me grown donkey ears, won't it?"

He shook his head. "It's not enchanted."

"It's not?" She lifted it toward her face, still leery. "But you tampered with it?"

He grinned. "Yes."

"Oh, shit. What did you do?"

Loki's answer was an angelic expression, and then he slipped inside his room and shut the door.

As the saying went, curiosity killed the cat, and probably Darcy, too. She sat on her bed and started tapping and swiping the iPod's interface. It claimed to hold 912 songs, which sounded about right. All her playlists were there, and when she opened one at random, the song list looked correct. Pulling up the first song on her Workout playlist, she put in her earbuds and listened. "Bad Romance," the Halestorm cover of a Lady Gaga song, played as normal. After a minute, she yanked the earbuds out and checked her ears. Still human.

Staring at the device, she racked her brain. What did he do? On a hunch, she checked the list of recently added songs. There were three new songs, the artist unknown, the titles, "Spring Dance," "Waltz," and "Fall Harvest."

"Don't do it, Darcy," she warned as she hit play and lifted the earbuds.

The song began with a mixture of voices, unintelligible, speaking in the background, the overall tone hollow, as though in a big room or hall. Then someone tapped out time, a three-four cadence if her few years of piano lessons held, and a fiddle began to play. The instrument had a interesting buzzy sound, as if each note was coming from multiple strings. It took a second, but the term Hardanger fiddle came to mind. The fiddle was joined by something that sounded like an oboe,

then a flute and next another fiddle. A drum began, driving the cadence and another instrument, an accordion probably, added a rhythmic drone. From the background, there came a faint tapping in time to the music and Darcy realized it was the sound of feet on a dance floor.

The two fiddles chased each other around a jaunty melody, the oboe and flute rose and fell with their own counter melody, the accordion signaled key changes from major to minor, and the drum set a beat that she could feel in her heart. Her vision blurred and for an instant she saw a vast golden hall, like something out of the Lord of the Rings movies, but shinier, cleaner; beautiful people dancing while others stood by watching, gossiping, laughing.

"Whoa," she said, fumbling with the iPod, hitting stop. She glanced back at herself in the mirror, making sure she hadn't grown horns or extra appendages. "Asgard music."

Flopping back on her bed, eyes on the ceiling, she hit play, turned up the volume and gave herself to the gorgeous music.

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Late Saturday morning found Darcy and Jane, in Darcy's car, driving into Puente Antiguo, destination, the local farmer's market.

It was the first time in months that Darcy had been able to coax Jane out of the house, without Thor and Loki. The cause of Jane's shut-in status was as much Jane as Loki.

Around Jane or Darcy, Loki had been slowly approaching human, but his sociability meter with the rest of humanity still had two settings: March across the planet, conquering the two-legged ants, or sulk in the New Mexico desert like Norse trailer trash, with him currently opting for the latter.

Loki's refusal to go anywhere except to and from the SHIELD facility had one bonus. No one in town got a really good look at him, and consequently few people, if anyone, connected Jane and Darcy's dark-haired roommate to the psycho who devastated one of America's biggest cities. And only the looniest of the conspiracy theory crowd made the connection between the huge robot that had marched through Puente Antiguo and Loki. Most of the town's people thought Thor and Loki were kept under close guard because they were foreign scientists brought in to work on a modern version of the Manhattan Project, a rumor advanced by SHIELD.

The downside of Loki's hermit lifestyle was that Jane feared leaving him and Thor home alone, thinking they might kill each other and flatten the house in the process. Darcy understood her concern, but didn't see any point in babysitting the two. If they were going to have a battle royale, it would happen with or without Jane. It wasn't like they could be grabbed by the scruff of their necks and pulled apart like a couple of small dogs.

"Loki only calls Thor a thick-headed oaf five or six times a day and sometime he forgets to act like a douche and has a civil conversation with Thor," said Darcy, earlier that morning. "Come with me, Jane, please. The kids will be fine."

Before she got in the car, Jane had stopped and stared wistfully back at the house.

"What's wrong?" asked Darcy.

"I just want to remember what it looked like before..."

Darcy rolled her eyes. "Get in, drama queen."

To get into town, she took the back way. Though most of the road was unpaved and Darcy's car

scrambled and thudded on the rutted washboard surface, it only took them five minutes to make it into Puente Antiguo proper.

Loki's mischief, though noisy and spectacular, had only affected a few blocks in the newer section on the northwest edge of town. The majority of the town hunched along a two mile stretch of Route 8, extending out two or three blocks from the main road. Houses were small, constructed of wood frame or adobe, with flat or pitched tin roofs. Yards were smaller, most enclosed with post and wire or chain link, although a few had white picket fencing or adobe walls. For most, landscaping didn't go beyond a few straggly trees, a dead car on blocks or a shrine to the Virgin Mary. A few, however, had vegetable gardens and fruit trees, with hand-painted wooden signs advertising fruit or fresh eggs for sale. Darcy slowed and eased the car around a flock of guinea hens that milled along the side of the road.

Once a mining town, Puente Antiguo's economy now depended on a spotty tourist trade and the region's few remaining farms and ranches. SHIELD's new facility, though a source of paranoid grumbling from the locals, had injected a new shot of life into a community that was just one generation shy of ghost town.

"How's my magic detector coming, Boss Lady?" On Friday, Jane had spent all morning in a conference call with Japanese physicists who were studying some anomaly with cosmic rays. She and Loki spent the afternoon in super-geek mode, obsessed with the data from the Japanese scientists' instruments. Consequently, Darcy's brilliant idea had fallen off their radar.

Jane let out a sigh that was almost a gust. "I'm still not sure that's a good idea. Thor agrees."

"Loki will help me," Darcy said confidently. "He'll do it just to spite you and Thor. Plus, it's not like he gives a rat's hairy little butt if I'm in danger."

"I don't think that's true," Jane said slowly.

"It's all just mischief to him," replied Darcy.

Jane's face turned almost apologetic as she said, "I think he likes you."

"Me? I don't think so." She slowed the car, downshifting as they approached the center of town. Here the rustic little houses had been remodeled into art studios and quaint shops. In lieu of off street parking, the businesses' few customers, mostly tourists, parked along the street, narrowing the roadway. "You're the one, the only one, he's ever nice to."

At this Jane's jaw dropped. "Me? He sees me as the reason why he's not King of Asgard. I 'changed' Thor somehow, or so he thinks." She shook her head. "He's polite because he needs my knowledge to relearn what he's forgotten about magic. Otherwise, he acts like I don't exist. It's you he really likes."

Darcy pulled a face. "He has a funny way of showing it. He steals my stuff. He dyed my hair purple and my laundry green. He put glowy snakes in my closet. Loosened the top on the salt shaker. And there was the coyote-lizard thing in the shower."

Jane gave Darcy a smirk that Loki would envy. "He *really* likes you."

"What is he...ten?"

"Maybe, 'ten' is all he has," said Jane, with an odd touch of pity.

"Sympathy for the devil, Jane?"



"He's been a lot better lately," conceded Jane. "It's been a while since I've caught him looking at me like he's fantasizing about ripping my heart out with his bare hands."

"Really? He does that?"

"He used to." Jane's shoulders hunched and she rubbed her right hand over her upper left arm, as though chilled. "But he still gets snotty sometimes." Her pretty face turned haughty and she said in a deep voice with an English accent, "You forget your place, mortal."

Darcy snorted. "He said that to me once."

"And what did you say?"

"I told him my place was as Queen of 15 Don Tenorio Road and as long as he was a resident of Jane and Darcy's Home for Unemployed Villains, he better not forget it."

"What did he say?"

"Something rude in the language of Mordor, I think." She shrugged. "The next day, snakes in my closet."

Jane laughed. "I remember that. You pounding on his door and yelling, 'Mad Science, come get your pets before I call animal control!'"

Darcy grinned. "Mmmm. Good times." Her smile faded as they moved into the newer (where newer meant 1960s to 70s) part of town, the transition marked by the red brick post office. The apartment complex where Andy and Max had lived came next, although "complex" was an overstatement. Built in Territorial style, tan stucco with red brick trim along the edge of the flat roof, it consisted of two long sections, eight units each, that faced each other across a dirt parking lot.

Fingers clenched on the steering wheel, her heart still not ready to think of Andy and Max in past tense, Darcy concentrated on the road. At City Hall, a two storey, dark red brick building, the street grew broader, with sidewalks, streetlights, and even bus stops (although the only bus that ran through town had a greyhound on the side). It was all probably the work of some overeager city planner who thought transforming the place into Mayberry would revitalize the economy.

Just a couple blocks later they were at Izzy's Diner where Thor had once showed his appreciation for coffee by pulverizing a hapless mug. The car's turn signal went tick-tick-tick as Darcy waited at the intersection.

A block away, an old black Labrador tottered across the street, tail wagging lazily. Jane watched the dog, brown eyes going wide for a second, and Darcy knew what scene replayed in her mind. Thor, laying motionless on the street, for all intents and purposes dead, slain by his brother's hand. *The brother I have a huge crush on.*

An iota of resentment snuck out and she thought, *Of course, if you hadn't moved Thor and his too-hot-to-be-such-a-psycho brother into our house, I wouldn't have tingling nethers for said loony.*

Darcy swallowed hard and turned the car left, passing Al's Auto Repair and a video rental store that was out of business long before the Destroyer blew off the doors and most of the front windows, the hole partially covered in plywood and two-by-fours. Ultimately, many of the businesses were already marching toward extinction faster than a T-Rex, with or without Loki's explosive help. A few, however, like Marcello's Pizzeria, actually benefited, using insurance money to expand their facilities.

"What about the rose?" asked Jane.

A pickup truck, white with peeling paint, went by and the driver honked and waved. She and Jane waved back at Carlos, their next door neighbor.

"It was just a joke," Darcy replied, meaning the rose. "He was just being...uh, playful and kind of dorky." Ahead, a dirt lot filled with vehicles signaled their approach to Carlson Farms Market. A tan dust haze hung over the lot. Darcy pulled in and began looking for a spot to park.

"Funny," said Jane, "that sounds like the Loki that Thor talks about. Fondly."

"I think *that* Loki's been MIA for a *looong* time," said Darcy.

Carlson Farms Market was one long adobe building, with a tin roofed porch that ran the length of the front. *Ristras*, blood red bundles of chile peppers, hung from edge of the porch. At the left end of the building, under a smaller porch, a group of people waited in the shade for roasted chile.

"The smell of fall in New Mexico," said Jane as they started for the building. The sun fell hot on Darcy's skin and she smiled, glad to have company for once. The smell Jane referred to, the spicy char of green chiles roasting in rotating metal hoppers over open flames, made her stomach growl. Breakfast had been a couple of slices of toast and a coffee.

Several older Hispanic men hung by the door in a gossipy cluster, dressed in button-up short-sleeve shirts, jeans, straw cowboy hats and boots. They tipped their hats at Jane and Darcy as the women went by. Inside, the crowd consisted of locals of various ethnicities, Anglo, Hispanic and Native American, and tourists, mostly Anglo. The tourists were easily identified by their fascination with a table in the back of the room that featured New Mexico chachkes: faux Native American art featuring Kokopelli, roadrunners and coyotes howling at the moon. The smell of fresh vegetables and homemade pastries joined the aroma of roasted chile.

Darcy and Jane made for the tall tables in the center of the room where the produce was piled in wooden boxes. There they picked up yellow squash, green beans, vine-ripened tomatoes, and a small bag of green chile. From a table by the wall, they got a bottle of salsa and a dozen *empanadas*, little apple-filled turnovers.

"So will you do it?" asked Darcy. She and Jane stood in the shade, watching as their batch of chiles tumbled in a roaster, the bright green skins browning and crackling in the fire's heat.

"The magic detector?" Jane's expression was pained, but Darcy could see her weakening.

"Yeah, d'uh?" Putting her hands on Jane's shoulders, she gave her a friendly shake. "Come on, I'm doing this for you, for us, for our freak-show family. I'll just snoop around town, in public. It'll be totally safe. And if I find anything, incriminating, I'll take it to Fury. K?"

Jane forced a smile. "Aren't you scared?"

The man who ran the chile roaster switched off the motor that rotated the contraption and pulled a plastic bag from a nearby box. He flipped open a door on the end of the roaster, tilted it and the chiles slid into the bag. Tying the bag shut, he handed it to Darcy.

"Of course I'm scared," she admitted as they walked to the car. "I don't have a blond hunk with lightning power to snuggle up to at night." She shifted the bag, which was almost scalding hot, away from her body. "But Fury's obviously stumped and Loki is...brain damaged." Jane's eyes turned thoughtful and she opened her mouth, but Darcy kept talking to keep Jane from asking if she knew exactly what was wrong with Loki's broken brain. "I don't want any more people to die.

Especially, not us. But not anybody."

"I wish we could all go," said Jane wistfully, as she got in the car. "It would be safer."

"The Scooby gang, with superpowers." Darcy pushed in the clutch and turned the key. "Don't worry." She smiled broadly at Jane with a confidence that now, in the bright light of day, she totally felt. "I'm on it."

To distract Jane before she could think too much and change her mind, Darcy motioned to the backseat. "Want to hear something cool? Get my iPod out of my purse..."

## Chapter 8

### CHAPTER EIGHT

Loki

There was a theory that all sentient beings, including "gods," had gods of their own. That the Aesir had deities above them, and those gods had gods, and so forth, leading to an infinite chain of elder races.

Were that true, Loki was certain that they did not answer even the simplest prayers. Or, at least, they were steadfastly ignoring his. As requests went, it was a simple one: "Keep the oaf silent for just a few hours."

Or perhaps his prayer had been answered, as Thor had been quiet for nearly an hour, an eternity for the hopelessly gregarious prince. Perhaps the gods did work in mysterious ways, in this case, fantasy football. With a studiousness that was almost disturbing, Thor continued researching players and statistics on Jane's iPad. Loki glanced upward. *Thank you, oh, imaginary one, for the American sport of football.*

Not that he had any fondness for football, or any sport, for that matter. It struck him as a slightly less bloody substitute for warfare, with all of the same stupid jingoism and tribalism. But if it kept Thor occupied and silent, he'd happily sing the praises of the National Football League.

Loki sat at his usual place on the left side of the couch, and Thor on the opposite end, his feet on the coffee table, a bottle of beer in one hand, the iPad on his lap. Thor had offered him a beer, but out of habitual belligerence he'd turned down the libation. His gaze now turned to the refrigerator. Opening the device and getting a beer wasn't beyond his stunted magical abilities, but doing so would attract Thor's attention.

With one last longing look at the refrigerator, he went back to flipping through the magazine, Darcy's men's magazine, *Esquire*. She had a point, much of the writing, especially the political and social commentary, was insightful. What struck him curious was the preponderance of imagery featuring attractive males. Shouldn't a men's magazine feature more photos of women? His mind then marched off on an appalling tangent where he wondered which of the men Darcy preferred, the shining, blond Thor-type or the darker, more refined males.

As was her custom on the weekends, Darcy had left the house earlier to go shopping. It wasn't unusual for her to wander off alone, sometimes gone overnight, spending time with friends in Albuquerque, returning late Sunday evening. What was unusual was Jane's willingness to accompany her, albeit on a short trip to town. Apparently Jane was relinquishing the self-deluded fantasy that she could somehow keep him and Thor from coming to blows. An ironic delusion given that she was the most likely source of conflict between the two.

Seeing her as a useful tool, he had temporarily abandoned his lovely dream of killing Jane. Grudgingly, he had developed a faint respect for her mental prowess, at least in matters of science, over the past six months. But he had no more fondness for her than he would for a good sword or well-trained horse. Less, actually.

Which made the twinge of concern he felt as the two women left the house all the more perplexing. The emotion itself was alien, an unexpected visit from an acquaintance he thought long gone. Its locus, he realized, wasn't Thor's tedious female, but her insolent assistant. In truth, he'd never been

able to construct the same lurid and comforting fantasies of strangling Darcy, as he could with Jane. Perhaps because he recognized that she was as trapped in this drama as he was. He knew she only stayed at the behest of Erik Selvig (another useful tool).

Six months was the blink of an eye to an immortal, too short to form attachments. Over that span, nevertheless, he'd felt a growing awareness of Darcy that was altering to an irritating concern for her well being.

The murder of the second SHIELD guard confirmed what he'd suspected with the first. This wasn't a clumsy attempt to frame him for the murders. It was a message, a morbid calling card. Unfortunately, he couldn't recall the messenger, nor could he decipher the missive's meaning.

He doubted the killer would strike in the hot light of the New Mexico day, but tonight, Darcy had another date with Sean, a sniveling boy who couldn't muster the courage to come out to the house, face him, and pick her up. Midgard courtship apparently was a study in cowardice.

He eyed Thor and then the door, contemplating the idea of sending a projection of himself to the craven lad. The practice, once as effortless as breathing, would tire him considerably, but it would be worth it just to see the boy piss himself.

Of course, the effort would express an interest he was loathed to admit.

It was at this point, that the non-existent deity chose to loosen Thor's tongue. "You know, brother, I've realized, of late, that Darcy is a woman of some charm. Pretty, in fact. Her eyes are the loveliest shade of blue."

Feeling a stupid superstitious fear that his thoughts had somehow put Darcy in Thor's mind, he looked up, startled. *It's just coincidence, nothing more.* Loki's lungs filled and emptied with a huge sigh and he affected his usual bored expression.

"Are you losing interest so soon in Jane?" he replied, with obvious sarcasm. "Seeking another mortal dalliance?"

Thor's blue eyes grew wide. "No, you misunderstand."

*No, I don't. How is it that you, one so completely bereft of the ability to detect nuance in speech, could be so loved by all?*

"It's merely that...she seems to enjoy your company. And you, hers."

"Matchmaker, really, Thor?" Loki rolled his eyes. "As usual, your innate laziness defeats you."

"Wh—?"

"You could do better than to chose the nearest available female. Show some initiative. Find someone who isn't trapped in the same house with me."

Not that he welcomed Thor's misguided attempt at matchmaking, but at least the dolt could select a woman who actually wanted him. As with everything else, Loki's memory of his courtships on Asgard was patchy and largely bound up in failure, but from what he remembered of female behavior, Darcy had no interest in him romantically. The women of Asgard's court expressed their interest through sly sideways looks and a marked tendency toward giggling. A few would try to impress with clever, dry witticisms, the sort of banter exhibited in the Jane Austen books on Darcy's shelves. Darcy, however, slung easy, barbed commentary at him as though he were a comrade or, worse yet, an irritating younger sibling. He grimaced.

"She often makes you smile, Loki."

"She's crass and given to expounding on whatever idea flits through her head," he said, realizing that it had become, as Darcy would say, a kind of mantra.

Thor shrugged. "Though their meeting was fleeting, Fandral has spoken well of her."

"Should that cretin ever try his lascivious games on Darcy, I'll cut off his balls and feed them to him raw." He closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead, realizing his error but hoping his subtlety deficient companion wouldn't notice the admission in his comment. With feigned ease, he lifted the magazine and pretended to be absorbed with an article on grilling the perfect steak.

Thor didn't respond immediately. After a minute or two, he said, "You need not worry, Loki. Your Darcy is far too clever for Fandral's romantic ploys."

"She's not my Darcy," replied Loki, thinking, *Truer words have never been spoken.*

## Chapter 9

### CHAPTER NINE

At six-thirty, for the second time that day, Darcy drove to Puente Antiguo, this time to meet Sean for dinner.

When she left the house, Loki was sitting on the front steps, reading Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* and eating an apple *empanada*. The activity was so normal that she could almost imagine he was a movie extra, still in costume, taking a break between takes. *If movie extras are smoking hot.*

"Looking for ideas for new pets?"

"The velociraptors sounds delightful," he replied, "though a rampaging triceratops might pack more damage per pound." The book, a hardback, was brand new and not one of hers. She wondered where he'd stolen it. Knowing Loki, he had opened a mini-Bifrost into a Barnes & Noble.

Just as she reached her car, he said, "Darcy."

"Yeah?"

"Do you have your weapon, the Taser?"

"You know it."

He nodded and went back to reading.

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Sean rented a house in Puente Antiguo, on Eagle Road, two blocks from Route 8. The exterior stucco was sand-colored, with long blotches of gray plaster striping the walls like pale veins, the start of crack repair that had never quite been finished. The exterior of the next door neighbor's house was missing chunks of stucco, and the porch one sneeze away from collapse, so by comparison, Sean's place was well maintained. The landlord had opted for a thick layer of crushed red lava rock instead of lawn with a narrow cracked concrete sidewalk that led up to the front door.

He was sitting on his front steps when she drove up, posture filled with the same gangly grace as Loki, and Darcy felt an electric frisson run up her spine at the resemblance. Except Sean was dressed in ordinary clothing, a light gray Henley shirt, blue jeans and hiking boots, and his smile when he saw Darcy was warm and open.

As he settled into the passenger seat, she asked, "How was California?"

"A long drive away," he said wearily. He hated to be cooped up inside anything very long, which was why he drove rather than flew to San Diego to visit his mother and younger sister. "And San Diego is as big and polluted as Los Angeles."

"Still haven't convinced them to move to Montana?" asked Darcy as she turned left on the main road and drove northwest. At this hour, the road was almost empty; the tourists had headed back to their hotel rooms in Santa Fe, and the locals were settling in at home for dinner, or to drink themselves to sleep.

"I probably never will," he replied. "Moira's art is selling well, and where better to sell driftwood

sculpture than a coastal city. Maybe I can just get her and Mom to move up the coast, someplace like Oregon."

She smiled sympathetically, although she didn't understand his aversion to urban areas. Big cities were fun, with lots of stuff to do, concerts, clubs, cultural events. "Maybe she'll meet a nice country boy, fall in love, and he'll sweep her away from the big city."

Sean tilted his head, blue eyes focused on left edge of the car seat, his slightly too long hair falling over his forehead. He flicked at a spot of lint on the dark blue fabric with long graceful fingers. "Maybe, but Moira's pretty committed to the idea of single. She says no mortal man is a match for her." He leaned his head back on the chair's headrest, turning to Darcy with a grin, showing a rare flash of teeth. He had great teeth, but rarely showed them. "Moira's such an artist, melodramatic, theatrical."

Darcy shrugged. "The only not-mortal guys I know are Thor and Loki. One's got a girlfriend and the other likes to break cities." Considering Sean's opinion of big urban areas, the second could be a selling point.

Sean's mouth settled into a frown. "Pass. I'd rather she stayed single and lived in a megapolis forever than hook up with either of those two."

Izzy's Diner shared a small parking lot with a Laundromat, a pet store and a nearby bar. The lot was full, although there were only a half dozen people in the diner and less than that doing laundry. The rest of the vehicles must have belonged to the evening's future drunk drivers. Darcy parked on the street a block away.

Sean took her hand as they walked to the diner and she felt a hard spark of attraction from his touch. Her crush on Loki didn't diminish her interest in Sean. If anything, unrequited feelings for her grumpy roommate amped up her libido, making Sean more attractive.

In Izzy's, they sat by the window and Esther Yazzie, one of her neighbor Carlos's many cousins, brought them a menu and took their drink order. Esther was eighteen with a three-year-old son at home and a second expanding her belly to huge proportions, but she had a ready smile on her round, mahogany brown face, dark brown eyes sparkling with good humor.

"The usual?" she said when she returned to take their food order, pen and order pad in hand.

"Are we that predictable?" Sean favored her with his quiet closed mouth smile and her cheeks reddened with a blush.

"Steak and enchiladas?" she said and he nodded.

"Combo plate number two," Darcy supplied with an embarrassed shrug.

After Esther left, Sean laughed and said, "We're in such a rut."

*Yeah, like an old married couple, right down to the "no sex" part.* Darcy shook her head, laughing too, her eyes roving over his body, stopping on his right arm, where his sleeve was pushed a few inches above his elbow. A scar, harsh and reddish against his fair skin, began just above his elbow and disappeared like an ugly river under his sleeve.

She nodded at his arm. "That's some scar. What happened?"

He cocked his head confused, then followed her line of sight. "Oh. That. Hunting accident. I was just a kid. My dad told me to be sure the stag was dead before I approached it, but, you know,



kids." He pushed the sleeve down over the scar. "It gored me with its antlers."

"You hunt?"

"Not in years. I used to go with my father and brothers."

"And Bambi goes, 'Whew!'" said Darcy. "How many brothers do you have?" She knew his father had passed away several years ago.

Reaching for the salt shaker, he spun it on the table's surface. "Four. You know, Irish, big families?" He looked up at her and said, "You just have the one brother, right?"

She plucked the salt shaker from his hand and set it primly next to the pepper. "One boy. One girl. Once my parents had the complete set, they quit."

Her parents were and continued to be utterly in love. Which sounded good in theory, but didn't leave much room for anyone else in the equation, including their own offspring. Darcy and her brother grew up feeling like the unnecessary third wheel in their parents' relationship. As soon as he graduated high school, her brother had moved from Tempe to attend college in Washington state, where he met his wife, a Canadian. They now lived in Ontario with their two kids. Darcy opted for a slightly closer option, the University of New Mexico, but like her brother, had little contact with her parents.

The world was happy to tell her she was insignificant; she didn't need to go home and be reminded by her parents.

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The sun had set and clouds of insects dive bombed the streetlights by the time Darcy and Sean left Izzy's. Country music twanged from the bar down the street. In the laundry, a woman sat in a plastic chair, glazed eyes on a load of laundry as it tumbled in the dryer. Her two kids played nearby, the girl pushing her younger brother in a laundry cart.

Hand in hand, Darcy and Sean ambled down the sidewalk. As they reached her car, she started to fish her keys out of her purse, then changed her mind.

"Do me a favor?"

"Uh, okay?" he agreed, despite a ghost of wariness in his posture.

"I want to take a look at Andy's apartment." Max's too, but Sean probably didn't know about the second guard's death yet, since he'd been away from work. "Come with?"

He turned his head, giving her a sideways look. "Why would you want to do that?"

A chunk of brown hair fell over his forehead and Darcy combed it off his face with her fingers. "Morbid curiosity?"

He dipped his chin toward his chest, dropping his pale eyes into shadow. "What are you up to, Darcy?"

The combination of unearthly male beauty and intense gaze rattled her composure. She swallowed and said, "Playing detective?"

"You're kidding."

"Never been more serious." She tightened her grip on his hand and met his gaze, imploring with her eyes. "Come on. It'll just take a few minutes? Please."

He broke eye contact, a resigned smile on his face. "Okay, Veronica Mars, let's go."

\*\*\*

The walk to the apartment complex took five minutes. "What now?" asked Sean.

Darcy studied the complex, completely without a plan, but unwilling to admit it. After months of nearly unending drought, the complex's grounds were barren, even by New Mexico standards. Sunflowers swayed in the light breeze on the corner of one building, surviving off a leak from a swamp cooler, but otherwise the lot was an unending sea of bare earth.

All but four of the apartments had a vehicle parked by the front door. Of those, only two were dark, lights off, without even the blue flicker of a television. A cluster of mailboxes, once bright green, now mostly rust, was positioned by the road. The boxes were labeled with reflective, stick-on numbers, but had no names.

Assuming that the car-less, dark apartments were Andy and Max's, Darcy marched across the lot, Sean in tow, toward apartment four. A narrow concrete sidewalk ran along the front of each building. The only light came from each apartment's porch light.

In front of apartment four's door, Darcy crouched down slowly, her still sore hip and knee sending little achy warnings to her brain.

"What--?" Sean started to ask, but was interrupted by the door opening. A blast of cigarette-heavy air hit them in the face.

A woman, probably in her late fifties, stared at them irritably. Her long hair had probably been dark brown and curly when she was younger, but now was iron gray and frizzy. She wore dark blue sweatpants and an oversized Green Bay Packers Jersey. Her feet were bare, with large bunions and desperately in need of a pedicure.

"What the hell are you doing?" she asked, the question directed mostly at Darcy who still crouched on the door's stoop.

"I've, uh, lost my contacts."

The woman stared at her and after a beat said, "Honey, you're wearing glasses."

"Well...yeah, exactly."

Sean cleared his throat politely and held a hand out to the woman. "Hi, I'm Sean O'Malley."

Pulling her attention from Darcy, the woman faced Sean. "Hey, I know you," she said. "You're that kid who rented Cici's house, over on Eagle Road." She took his hand and did a dainty finger shake. "I'm Carol, Cici's cousin."

He nodded, eyes wide, exuding effortless boyish charm. "Sorry about, uh, creeping you out, but we were looking for a friend. Andy Valenzuela?"

"Young guy, works for the military installation that supposedly don't exist?"

Darcy straightened. "Yeah, wink-wink, nudge-nudge."

Carol smiled. "I haven't seen him since Sunday." She pointed across the lot to an apartment on the end. "He lives in number sixteen. Now that you mention it, that's kind of weird. I mean, that's his truck." A shiny red Toyota Tacoma was parked in front of the apartment.

Her eyebrows crawled upward, dark eyes going wide. "You don't think he's been murdered? Like that other guy?" She craned her neck out the door and to the right. "Did you hear about that? The cops said he was frozen solid."

"Frozen?" said Sean, glancing at Darcy, blinking in shock. "Who?"

"Another one of them boys from the place that don't exist. Max Padilla. A shame, he was a cutey." Grabbing a chunk of her hair, she gave it several nervous twists. "You don't think Andy's over there, now? Dead? Frozen?"

Darcy stared blankly into the darkness of Carol's apartment. She didn't know where Andy's body was now, but it definitely wasn't in his apartment.

"I'm sure someone would have noticed, but is there a super?" she asked. "Somebody with a key? Maybe we could take a look?"

Carol shoved her hands into the sweatpants' pockets, the left emerging with a pack of cigarettes, the right with a lighter. She lit up, took a long drag and exhaled, an expression of bliss on her face. Darcy struggled not to cough and Sean looked ill.

At length, Carol answered, "The complex is owned by Eddie Perea. The state representative." After another luxuriant suck on the cigarette, she leaned against the doorway, emitting a toxic cloud into the night air. "He lives in Raton, so he's not around much. For emergencies, we're supposed to call his cousin, Mark King." Her nose wrinkled like she'd gotten a whiff of dog poo. "Of course, half the time, Mark's drunk off his ass, which is why Eddie came down this week."

"What apartment did Max live in?" asked Darcy.

"Six."

Sean apologized once more for lurking on her doorstep, and they left, leaving Carol to her future emphysema and whatever she had been doing in the dark apartment.

The parking spot in front of Max's apartment was empty, his Big Dog motorcycle nowhere in sight. Darcy bent down and held her palm over the concrete. Something prickled her skin and her heart leaped. Unfortunately, when she turned her hand over, she found that the cause was a spiny burr that had snagged her skin and not a nifty ability to sense magic. Gingerly, she pulled it free of her palm.

"You going to tell me what you're doing?" asked Sean.

"Checking for magic."

"Magic? Are you serious?"

Darcy looked up at him, amused. "You work for SHIELD, a place that employs super soldiers and thunder gods, and you don't believe in magic?"

"Okay. Point." He rubbed the back of his head. "Though, technically, only Steve Rogers is on payroll. Thor's an unpaid consultant."

"And Loki is Jane's unpaid Igor. Why do you think I hit SHIELD up for their food bill?"

He gave her an appraising look. "So you can, what, sense magic?"

"Not exactly." She stood up. "Jane and Loki are supposed to build me magic detector, so I can investigate properly."

His distinctive cheekbones got rounder as he obviously wrestled back a laugh. "'Investigate?'"

She smacked his shoulder. "This is serious!"

Holding up his hands in surrender, blue eyes still shining with mirth, he said, "Okay. So SHIELD probably went over this place with a fine-toothed comb. What do you think you'll find?"

"Clues." She started to dig around in her purse. Wallet, tampons, Taser, fossilized stick of gum, condoms, cell phone, Swiss Army knife...little LED flashlight. "Who needs a Boy Scout; you've got Darcy."

She walked over to the apartment's window, shining the light inside. The window was filthy and covered by cheap plastic blinds, which were tilted open. The flashlight picked out a cheap plaid sofa, coffee table, and a small kitchen beyond. A short hallway probably led to the bathroom and bedroom. No sign of evil wizards with insta-freeze magic wands.

Andy's apartment was the same, except his couch was lime green velour, and his truck, with a bumper sticker that displayed the American flag and the words, "These colors don't run," waited like a big metal dog for an owner who would never return.

"They must have known their killer. There was no sign of a break-in," said Darcy.

"Not necessarily," observed Sean. One hand on the rough stucco, he leaned against the building, attention on Darcy. "Let's say it was Loki--"

"It wasn't," said Darcy.

"I know. But let's pretend it was. A guy like him, with that kind of power, could pick the lock with magic. He could probably, uh," he blinked rapidly, clearly searching for the right words, "mesmerize somebody into doing anything."

Darcy shivered and nodded in agreement. Andy and Max weren't mall cops. Either the killer was a super-bad-ass or he had a way to subdue highly skilled soldiers without a fuss. Grim determination to find whomever killed them welled up inside her like hot lava.

"Let's go, Darcy. You're just freaking yourself out." He surprised her by putting his arm over her shoulder, and she let herself be led away and back down the street toward her car. At about five eleven, Sean wasn't as tall as Loki, but he smelled just as good and there was no awkward armor between him and her hand around his waist. She snuggled against his side and they walked in silence through the town.

Up ahead, two people, white men in their late thirties, were approaching from the opposite direction. One wore a cowboy hat and the other, a John Deere cap. Judging from their unsteady pace, both were just one beer shy of alcohol poisoning. Darcy and Sean moved to the side to let them pass. Her nose stung with the combined stench of alcohol and stale cigarettes.

"Hey, Missie, you looking for a real man?" said the guy in the cap, a greasy leer on his face.

"Stupid, meet booze," muttered Darcy.

"What did you say?" Both men stopped, and John Deere's leer morphed into a scowl.

Knowing the type, she didn't respond and she and Sean continued on toward the car.

"Hey, I know you!"

At the sound of footsteps, Darcy and Sean stopped and turned.

Darcy's would-be suitor was in the lead, jaw thrust forward, posture aggressive. As he neared, she saw that his eyes were hazel, the whites yellowed and reddish with prominent blood vessels. He was a walking redneck cliché; the John Deere cap on his head, a stained T-shirt with the image of a deer in a gun's sights, faded blue jeans, pushed down by a beer belly, and scuffed cowboy boots.

"You're one of those girls. You live with him--Loki."

"No," said Darcy. "He's not--"

"We know damn well who he is," said John Deere, nudging his buddy, who nodded in agreement.

"We worked for SHIELD, before...they let us go." Taking a step closer, he glared at Darcy.

"What's it like to live with a killer? What's it like to betray your own kind to screw the devil?"

Normally, Darcy would have had a sharp retort, but her conflicted feelings for Loki robbed her of snark. All she could manage was, "Hello, this is your liver, I'm dying here."

Her eyes moved up and down the street, seeing no one else in the vicinity, the beginnings of unease crawling up her spine. She debated pointing out the obvious. If her black-haired roommate *was* Loki, then the blond was Thor. And Thor would cheerfully pound John Deere and his pal into the consistency of mashed potatoes if they hurt her or Sean.

"Let's go, Darcy," said Sean, giving the men a contemptuous look.

"Did you just look at me, pretty boy?" John Deere's drunken glare blazed at Sean.

"You really want to go home and sober up," said Sean, his tone bored, and once again Darcy was struck by how much he reminded her of Loki. He slid his arm off Darcy and took a step toward the rednecks.

"I really want to kick your ass," was John Deere's response. The guy had at least fifty pounds on Sean, although most of it was in his gut. It was like redneck Sumo wrestler meets elf. He took a swing at Sean, who dodged the blow with ease and lifted his fists to fight.

"Bust his pretty face in," encouraged Cowboy Hat, not that the drunk needed any. John Deere started toward Sean, then stopped, a stupid expression on his face, if it were possible for him to look stupider. His eyes rolled back in his head and he fell to the ground in a twitching heap.

Sean's grim expression shifted to confusion, his eyes following the Taser's metal leads back to Darcy's hand. "You zapped him?" Fists still raised, he stared dumbfounded at the pile of slobbering Bubba at his feet.

"He totally deserved it." The Taser was new and she'd been dying to try it out, but a certain god of mischief had been actually nice to her lately, leaving no available test subjects.

The three lifted their gaze from the unconscious idiot at the same time, with Cowboy Hat's beady

eyes narrowing as he caught sight of the weapon in Darcy's hand. At that moment, she realized the minuscule flaw in her fabulous plan. The Taser only had enough juice to knock out one drunk.

Cowboy Hat started toward Darcy and she shrank back. "You little cun--"

"I wouldn't do that Mr. Edwards," said a strong female voice behind them.

Sean, who had already moved between the drunk and Darcy, didn't turn, his attention fast on the belligerent cowboy. But Mr. Edwards stopped, blinking pig-like in the glare of a flashlight. Turning, Darcy saw Pam Johnson, one of SHIELD's guards. At five ten, blond, blue-eyed and broad shouldered, Pam would have looked at home on a battlefield next to Thor. In full body armor, she was just as imposing, a heavy black flashlight focused on Edwards, her other hand ready on the pistol at her waist.

Squinting in the light, Edwards raised an arm to ward off the glare. "This is none of your business."

"You sure?" She tapped a finger on the Desert Eagle, her demeanor calm.

Macho pride revved up by alcohol warred with good sense in Edward's eyes and for a second it looked like pride might win. Then he backed away, palms out. "Okay, okay, don't get your panties in a twist."

With a confident swagger, Pam moved to stand beside Sean. Reaching down, she yanked the Taser's prongs from the groaning, semiconscious drunk. "Get him out of here."

Casting one last dirty look at Darcy and Sean, Edwards bent and hauled his buddy to his feet. John Deere opened his mouth, bleary eyes on Darcy and said, "Germongle paper rock scissors." The two continued slowly down the sidewalk, before turning and disappearing behind Izzy's Diner. Pam watched them go, hands on her hips.

"We probably should have called the sheriff's office except," Pam eyed Darcy's Taser, "I can't remember. Are stun guns legal in New Mexico?"

Darcy blinked, an innocent expression on her face. "Of course." She had no idea.

Pam grinned. "And we probably don't need him babbling the 'L' word at the cops."

"He said he worked for SHIELD," said Darcy. "An agent? Guard?"

"Peter Edwards owns Edwards Heating and Cooling. In the interest of good public relations, SHIELD hired him and some other local contractors to do work on the facility. From what I've heard, Edwards is a genius with HVAC systems."

"He's the one that set up the arctic freeze air conditioner?" Darcy shook her head, and started to wind the metal leads around the Taser.

"It worked initially," observed Pam, "But after he showed up for work drunk one too many times, his contract was cancelled. The system started malfunctioning right after. No one's been able to fix it since."

"Loki did," said Darcy, absently.

"Did he?" Pam shrugged. "I guess magic is good for something besides murder."

"I remember now," said Sean, his blue eyes silver in the streetlight, gaze on the street beyond and

an approaching vehicle's headlights. "His buddy, the one Darcy Tased, must be Mark King."

To Darcy, he explained, "Money makes the world go around; everything goes through accounting. Edwards listed King as an employee."

The three watched as a white van with "Edward's Heating and Cooling" painted in faded black letters on its side drove by slowly. "Just what the road needs," said Pam, "Another drunk."

The SHIELD guard turned and walked back several feet where she scooped up two large, white plastic bags from the sidewalk. "Frito pies, burritos and burgers for the night shift," she explained. "I'm on dinner detail."

"Thanks for the rescue," said Darcy. "Next time, I'll bring two Tasers."

"Yeah, thanks," said Sean, showing no signs of resenting being rescued by a woman, which pleased Darcy.

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In her car, just as she turned up Eagle Road, Darcy said, "D'oh!"

"What?" asked Sean.

"Mark King." She stopped the car in front of Sean's house, sliding the gear shift into neutral.

"Oh!" said Sean. "You think it's the same Mark King."

"How many can there be in a burg this size? And he's friends with a guy who's a 'genius' with refrigeration."

Sean rubbed his chin. "It's an interesting coincidence. But neither guy looked like the type who'd do magic." He wiggled his long fingers when he said "magic."

Darcy purse her lips and shrugged. "Is there a type? Long beard, a staff and robes?"

Sean bent his head forward and pushed his fingers through his shaggy hair. He looked at her, expression weary and a little sad. "I don't think you should be messing around in this. Whoever killed Andy and Max--"

"--is dangerous. I know."

"I don't think you do." He shook his head. "Just promise me you won't do this alone. Take Jane, or call me, but don't do this by yourself."

Before she could respond, he leaned toward her, one hand on her chin and kissed her. It was brief and over too soon, but nothing about it suggested inexperience. If the rest of Sean was a virgin, his lips weren't. His mouth was warm against hers, the kiss filled with exquisite hunger. When he backed away, she almost grabbed him and dragged him back.

"Be careful." And then he was gone, walking up his front path and then disappearing into his house.

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Halfway home, on the roughest part of the road, the combined effect of adrenaline and lust wore off and Darcy's hands started to shake. Sean's kiss, though amazing and long overdue, she could

handle. But the attempted violence on her person, even though averted by 50,000 volts of electricity and a SHIELD guard, left her feeling violated and vulnerable. She shuddered, her body remembering another incident, long ago, the memory itself repressed deep in her mind.

The lights were all off in the house, but someone had left the porch light on. She tromped up the stairs, her mission clear: first, alcohol; and then the cozy safety of her room and the oblivion of sleep.

In the house, she made her way through the living room, maneuvering around the lumpy shapes of furniture, to the kitchen where she flicked on the light.

A half empty bottle of red wine sat on the kitchen counter, Loki's doing probably, since Jane preferred white and Thor, beer. Flipping open the cabinet door, she pulled out one of their five remaining wine glasses. There had been a set of eight, but Thor broke two (accidentally), and Darcy, the other. She tugged the cork from the bottle and started to pour, the task made difficult by her shaking hands.

"You're trembling. Why?"

Startled, she jumped, her hand jerked and the tip of the bottle hit the rim of the glass. Red wine splattered on the tan countertop. "Dammit! Loki!"

"What happened?" His hand closed around her upper arm, pulling her around.

The action triggered an old muscle memory, forged out of fear and brought to the surface by overworked nerves. She jerked away, punching at his hand. "Don't touch me!"

She froze, back against the counter, staring at him. Rather than a herd of cattle's worth of leather, he wore close-fitting black pants, a shirt in a shade of green so dark it was almost black and a heavy black over-tunic. Except for a little bit of gold embroidery around the shirt's high collar, it was all very simple.

"What did Sean do?" he said, the words devoid of emotion, and somehow vibrating with menace. He watched her, still as a statue, jaw hard, pale face grim, a predator about to pounce.

"Nothing! It wasn't him, okay?"

"*What* wasn't him?" There must have been magic in his words, because they vibrated in her skull and down to her toes like the bass from a huge woofer at a rock concert.

Sucking in a deep breath, like a swimmer coming up for air, she then exhaled, muscles relaxing slowly. Her nerves still shivered, in part because of the powerful magical being before her who was about a pin drop from coming unglued. "Stop looking at me like that. I admit it, you're scaring the pathetic mortal. Does that make you happy?"

He flinched slightly and then closed his eyes. "No," he said through bared teeth.

A little thrown by his answer, she said, "Well, then, don't do that." With a wary glance his way, she pulled a paper towel off the roll and mopped up the little red puddles. When she finished, she balled up the used towel and tossed it at the nearby trash bin. It soared anemically and fell a couple feet short.

His green eyes moved from the wadded-up paper towel, to Darcy, to the towel and back. "You display a lamentable lack of comprehension of basic physics."



"Is that Loki for 'You throw like a girl'?"

Instead of an answer, he made a lazy gesture at the paper towel and it hopped obediently in the bin.

"Yeah, well, you do magic like Harry Potter."

"Nonsense. I don't need a wand."

"I remember a big scepter thing. Compensating, much?"

The sound of a door squeaking open interrupted their un-witty banter, and Thor appeared a moment later, blinking sleepily at them from the living room. "Jane and I heard angry voices," he said.

"Darcy, you're home. How was your...date?"

"Like a really weird chick flick." With rednecks and Tasers.

He stared at Darcy blankly, shooting Loki a questioning glance. Getting no explanation from his brother, he gave up and said, with a huge smile on his handsome face, "Wonderful!"

Darcy smiled wearily back and Loki said, tersely, "Good. Night. Thor."

"Goodnight, brother," he replied. With a nod at Darcy, he turned for bed.

"I'm not your brother," muttered Loki.

"I'm not your brother," Darcy parroted. She picked up the wine glass and took a sip. "If there was a talking Loki doll, that would definitely be something it would say."

"Stop," he said.

"Stop what?"

"Deflecting."

She leaned back against the counter, gave the wine glass a casual swirl and eyed Loki, who stared back, mouth a hard line. Her heart still drummed at a faster than usual tempo, but she could feel tension easing from her body. The cause wasn't just the wine.

Despite her reaction earlier, she believed he wouldn't hurt her, although she didn't outright trust him. How do you trust someone who, in a jealous snit, would try to kill his brother, especially a brother who was more loyal than Lassie? But she also didn't think Loki was the kind of guy who'd make declarations like, "I could never hurt you," especially to an insignificant, barely useful science assistant, unless he meant it.

And strangely, in his presence, for the most part, she felt irrationally safe.

"Deflecting?" she said.

"Tell me what happened tonight." Muscles tightened in his angular face as though he were in pain. "Please."

In spite of her mood, she laughed. "Don't hurt yourself, your princeliness."

The corner of his mouth twitched. "You might note, my head didn't explode."

Her knee and hip were starting ache, so she set her drink to the side, then pulled herself up to sit on

the countertop. Her heel banged against the dishwasher, sending a shock of pain up her leg.

As she picked up her wine, he closed the distance between them. Reaching behind her head, he opened the cabinet just enough to slide out a wine glass. The wine bottle went glug-glug-glug as he poured himself a glass, and Darcy swallowed a huge gulp of wine, hoping to put out the flame of lust that surged through her body.

Taking a very small step back, but still too close, he canted his head to the side. Sitting on the countertop, she was almost his height. After another smaller sip of wine, she told him about her trip to the apartment complex, trying to ignore the homicidal fire that burned in his eyes when she described the encounter with Peter Edwards and Mike King.

She ended with, "And I finally got to first base. Yay me."

His lip curled. "At least the boy made an attempt to defend you. He isn't entirely useless."

"Give him a break. He's an accountant, not a superhero." Swinging a leg, she kicked him lightly on the leg. "So what do you think? Edwards might have the expertise to rig up a freezy gun. Maybe he's one of those humans you talked about. The descendent of mortal-immortal sex. And King has keys to the apartments. Plus, they hate you."

"Who doesn't?" he said almost cheerfully.

*Your brother. Me.* She licked a fingertip and ran it over the glass's rim till it sang dully. "If I had a way to detect magic, I could snoop around Edwards's place."

He lifted his glass and drained it. Setting the empty glass by her side, he met her eyes. She took another sip, every cell in her body thrumming at his proximity.

"I think that would be ill advised," he said. "Edwards attacked you tonight. Even if he isn't the killer, he's clearly a violent brute."

"So?" she said, trying to sound nonchalant, although her voice cracked a bit.

"So next time there may not be a SHIELD guard to save you." His eyes swept over the kitchen and he gave Darcy a meaningful look. "Fury will know your theory soon enough."

She nodded, knowing he meant SHIELD's bugs. Jane had found and sent several through the garbage disposal this week, but they'd probably already been replaced.

"Mischievous, Loki. This is totally your thing."

"Perhaps I'm taking a holiday from getting foolish mortals killed."

"No, no," she whined. "You can't grow a conscience now." She knocked on his forehead with her knuckles. "Hello. Can the real Loki come out and play?"

He clamped a hand around her wrist, holding her arm away from his face. "Careful what you ask for, girl." His tone and eyes turned icy.

She gulped. "If Fury hauls your ass off to a SHIELD holding cell, Thor goes with you. Thor without his Janey-poo is mopey Thor. Imagine that." She waved her free hand like a magician conjuring an illusion. "You and the God of Emo in a small cell."

"You are attempting to appeal to my selfish interests."

"Yep."

He opened his hand, fingers spread wide, releasing her arm. "That would be a wise stratagem."

"I know, huh?" She kicked him again. "So that's a yes?"

He dropped his gaze to the floor, scuffing at a spot on the linoleum with his boot, and shrugged. "It would vex Thor."

"Dude, you so need a career that isn't tweaking Thor." Kick. "You could stop hiding and come with. Then I'd have you and Thor as backup."

"I don't involve myself in the affairs of mortals."

"No, you just blow up our stuff and unleash monsters on our cities."

"You're implying that the two aren't mutually exclusive." His eyes met hers, expression boyish and excessively innocent. They stared at each other and then both burst out laughing.

It was cathartic, a huge release after a week of tension. She didn't know exactly what was so funny, and doubted he did either, but she laughed anyway. Laughter changed his face, all the hard lines softened, cheeks rounded, little lines around his eyes making him terribly human. Any humor he'd shown around Jane was a pale shadow of what he revealed now. He bent his head, rubbing his forehead, shoulders still shaking with laughter.

"Shit, Mad Science, why do you have to be so..."

"So what?" Suddenly he was close enough that her knees were on either side of his waist, his face inches from hers. Her heart started to flutter in her chest, like a bug trapped in a jar, banging against her ribs.

"Rude, arrogant, evil. Smart, funny, sometimes not-evil..." She downed the rest of the wine in a big gulp. "Adorable."

He looked genuinely confused. "Puppies are adorable."

"So are guys are like Sean, or Thor, or you." *Shut up, Darcy.* She frowned at the empty glass. *What was in that wine?*

When she looked up, his eyes stared blankly at something to her left, his expression confused, looking like he was working out a math problem that should have been easy, but somehow wasn't.

Maybe it was the wine or the remnants of the kiss from Sean, but his proximity was getting almost painful.

"Either kiss me or get the hell out of my space before my girl parts explode." Her mouth dropped open, shocked, as the words scurried away like a dog that had slipped its leash, with no intention of returning. Lifting her chin, her face burning, she braced herself for the nasty comment to come.

His face unreadable, he neatly plucked her glasses from her face and did exactly what she asked.

Stunned, she didn't respond immediately. His mouth was warm, but every muscle in her body went rigid as ice. His hand was on her right leg, fingers bleeding heat through her jeans. Almost too late, she realized that Loki probably wasn't interested in kissing statues. Feeling him pulling back, she broke through shock and grabbed his face, pressing her mouth to his.

If she had to guess, she'd say that memories of kissing, like magic, lay on the cutting room floor of his broken brain. His initial approach was hesitant, but not without skill. What his mind forgot, his lips remembered. Sliding her fingers back along his skull, she buried them in his hair, as his clever mouth hinted at other talents that sent heat straight to her groin. She ran her tongue along his lower lip and he took the invitation, his tongue teasing her mouth in an exquisite dance. The kiss was scalding hot, but unhurried, as if he, an immortal, had all the time in the world.

Darcy, a mere mortal, didn't have that kind of patience. She shifted her hands down to his waist, fingers trying to figure a way under his clothes. After a minute of this, he made a growl in his throat and grabbed her arms by the wrists, pinning them behind her back and pulling her to him. Her breasts were crushed hard against his chest, and top of his hips pressed against her inner thighs. At that moment, she forgot where they were, her world shrinking to just the places where her body contacted Loki's, the drumming of his heartbeat against hers, the delicious surrender to passion.

Dimly, she heard a door open, and murmured voices, male, female, then a giggle. Someone, said, with exasperated humor, "Thor," then, "I'll be right back."

Loki obviously recognized the voice when Darcy did, breaking the kiss, panting against her mouth. Their eyes met, then they both looked in the direction of the hallway. With disappointing ease, he disengaged from her and moved backwards.

He stood before her, blinking, looking surprised, and maybe a little guilty. Then in swirl of green mist, he disappeared. A second later Jane walked into the kitchen, a silly smile on her face. "Oh," she said, startled, "Darcy, hi. I didn't know you were still up."

Since, in the absence of Loki, she was about to fall anyway, Darcy slid off the countertop to the floor. Her knees wobbled and she leaned against the counter.

"What's wrong?" said Jane.

*Loki just kissed the hell out me.* She stared at Jane like the proverbial deer in headlights, her mouth moving, but nothing coming out.

"Darcy--?"

"Nothing," she said, quickly. "Goodnight." Leaving Jane standing perplexed in the kitchen, she fled to her room.

# Chapter 10

## CHAPTER TEN

Six months ago, when Jane announced that Loki would be moving in, Darcy decided that she had to hate him.

It wasn't just that she was the last to know, as usual. Jane had conferred with Erik about the idea at length before she came to Darcy. That part made sense, given that Erik had essentially been mind raped by Thor's prodigal brother.

It wasn't because Loki was, well, *Loki*, and E.V.I.L. That went without saying.

After Jane told her the news, Darcy wandered back to her room. The walls were still the bland original white, but she had her new bedroom set and desk. She flopped on the bed, on the pretty comforter with a bold red flower pattern. As she stared at the ceiling, at the place in the texture that looked like a dragon, she realized why she had to hate Loki.

This was her home. With Jane and Erik. Except now Erik was moving out, to be replaced by Thor and his dangerous brother who would probably kill them all in their sleep.

If she stayed, she'd still live there, but it wouldn't be home anymore. She hated Loki because he was taking her sense of home.

To be honest, Darcy knew she also should have hated Thor for being such a dope when it came to his lunatic brother, but it was damned hard to hate Thor. So she spent the two weeks before their arrival lobbing imaginary fire balls at a vague mental image of Loki. Beyond "black hair," "skinnier than Thor," and "nuts," her concept of Loki was amorphous, this in part because of SHIELD's efforts.

SHIELD and other powers-that-be realized early on that the two words, "alien invasion," had a tendency to send the entire populace into a panic, buying guns, ammo, canned goods and water and stocking up for a long siege. While this was a great boon for the makers of guns, ammo and other survivalist gear, the rest of the economy was bound to suffer. A country couldn't flourish when most of its citizenry were hunkered down in their homes, guns pointing skyward, refusing to go about their usual daily activities.

Then there were the Avengers themselves, particularly Cap, the Hulk and Thor. Ordinary human Tony Stark had already thrown a huge monkey wrench into the gears of the world's political power structure. Rumors that America's already formidable military industrial complex now included super soldiers and thunder gods threatened to breed the kind of global instability that even Iron Man couldn't contain.

So SHIELD and other secret parts of the government did their best to downplay the alien invasion aspect of the mess, as well as the Avengers' involvement, suppressing information, and minimizing the entire incident, hoping that the public's attention would wander off to the latest missing debutant, adulterous celebrity, or natural disaster.

For the most part, it was working, except for what some called the Loki Problem.

Loki wasn't a proper space alien, ugly and with a face like the back end of a toad. The many images of him from cameras and cell phones, uploaded to the Internet --erased by SHIELD and the government, then uploaded again --showed a handsome young man, resonant with smoldering

sexuality. In no time, he had a cult-like following, most devoted to speculating about what drove the pretty man to such violence.

Darcy knew about this from the grumblings of SHIELD's agents, guards and even some of the Avengers. And if she wanted to, she could have accessed video and images off-limits to ordinary citizens. Not because she, a lowly science assistant, had the clearance, but because to Darcy, the word "no" was a challenge and not an absolute.

But she was too busy with her own life to spend free time watching the ultra-violent documentary of what was essentially the clan Odinson's family drama. The first time SHIELD had offered her a permanent, paying job as Jane's assistant, she'd turned them down, only to find that half her college credits had disappeared and her degree was in jeopardy. Only after several months, when she finally broke down and accepted the offer, did her BA in Political Science go through. Meanwhile Jane's research, now with funding and a real laboratory, took off and Darcy started doing more than being Jane's personal barista and errand girl. Helping the emotionally shattered Erik transition back to normal life was no small task either.

Beyond the initial images of the attack that were shown on television, Darcy had never seen Loki.

Thor and Loki arrived around noon, Saturday morning, at the end of January. They were early. SHIELD had said they'd be there around three. The daytime temperature had warmed up to 55-degrees, and Darcy was about to go jogging when the doorbell rang. She paused from putting on her shoes and went to the window, saw the black SUV and groaned.

Feeling belligerent, she sat on her bed and went back to her shoes, tucking lace loops carefully under each other like a child tying her shoes for the first time. Ignoring the murmur of voices at the door, she went to her closet to get a light jacket and her favorite wool hat. She zipped up the jacket, pushed the hat firmly down on her head, and put her iPod's earbuds in her ears like a soldier strapping on armor. With a deep breath, she pulled open the bedroom door and marched into the living room.

"Darcy!" Thor greeted her enthusiastically the instant he spotted her. His golden hair was longer and weariness shadowed his blue eyes, but he was as she remembered him. Magnificent, cheerful, charismatic. She wondered if he still liked Pop-Tarts. He wore something that she called Asgard-lite: breeches, boots, a red tunic with light armoring around the shoulders and neck, and a long-sleeved shirt with elaborate embroidery on the sleeves and collar. "It is so good to see you again!"

"Good to see you too, big guy," she replied, eyes moving to the man at his side. Unlike Thor, he still seemed to be outfitted for war, with elaborate layers of armor, possibly the same that he wore when leading the Chitauri. It was hard to tell though, since it was covered in crusty stains. Even at a distance, the slight slaughterhouse smell told her the stains were blood. Obviously, Thor's strong arms were the only thing keeping him upright.

Without the bloodied Asgard armor, or Thor by his side, he could have been any badly injured, dark-haired, young man. He looked like he'd been hit by a semi truck, caught under the wheels and dragged for several miles. He was porcelain pale, blue blood vessels stark against the few undamaged patches of skin. A dense network of slashes and gashes covered his face, a few starting to scab over, but most still raw. His right eye was almost swollen shut and the left a bloody ruin. She learned later that most of the bones in his hands had been broken. SHIELD's doctors wouldn't touch him (and he wouldn't have let them), but Thor had ask for and been given gauze, which he used to wrap his brother's hands, covering the ragged bone that jutted from skin. Consequently, Loki, ultimate big bad with a glorious purpose, now resembled the unhappy offspring of a vampire and a mummy.

Fierce malevolence, the only thing recognizably Loki about him, glared from his eye, but Darcy shrugged it off.

This was the man who had sent the Destroyer after Thor; Phil Coulson's killer; the monster that brought an alien army to Earth, intent on destroying everything she loved. But, staring at the skinny, shattered wraith before her, she felt no fear. Her four-year-old nephew could kick his ass. Her Taser would probably kill him. The righteous hatred that she had prepared simmered dully in her gut, but didn't catch fire as she expected.

Mostly she was afraid that Thor had brought him here to die, that in the morning, there'd be a big, bloody corpse in the house, cursing the home with major death karma. Dead things gave Darcy the creeps. Even things that were better off dead, like spiders, got ickier when the life left their body.

After Thor attempted to introduce her to Loki, with neither acknowledging the other, Darcy said, "And you brought him here...to die?"

"No," replied Thor, with an encouraging smile at his brother, "his wounds look far worse than they are." Loki responded with a look that was momentarily incredulous, then scathing. Obviously, Thor's rescue hadn't scored him any warm fuzzies from his vengeful brother.

Frankly, Mr. Big Bad had a point. "He looks like ground meat," observed Darcy. "Wrap him in plastic and Styrofoam and sell him for \$2.99 a pound."

At this, Loki turned the full strength of his menacing gaze on her. Determined not to be cowed by this horrible stranger in her living room, she met his stare. For a millisecond, something shifted in his expression, loathing changing to cunning recognition. He broke eye contact, turning contemptuously away.

Thor and Jane began to talk about the brothers' living arrangements and Darcy studied Loki, wondering what the hell Jane had let into their house. Slumped against Thor, he stood several inches shorter than his brother, but she could tell there was more of him, and if straightened to his full height, he'd be as tall as Thor. Next to his muscular brother, he looked like he'd blow away in a stiff wind, but Darcy suspected that, without his injuries, if his face was as pretty as people said, he'd probably be her type.

*Ugh.* She looked longingly at the door, muscles in her legs almost itching for a run. Thor and Jane were still talking; they might have been speaking to her, but her attention wandered back to Loki. Their eyes met and Darcy shuddered, seeing death in his eyes. Not hers; his. She'd seen that wide-eyed, glassy, startled expression years before when the vet put down the family dog.

Completely creeped out, she turned to Jane and said, "I'm going for a run."

"Now?"

Darcy arched her eyebrows at Jane. "Yeah, Mom, now."

Jane shot Thor an apologetic glance. "I asked if you could drive to town and buy some more bandages and first-aid supplies."

"Why? Our Muppets band-aids aren't good enough for the God of Mayhem? Would he prefer Hello Kitty?" She didn't know why she was being so childish. Seeing Jane's weary face, she felt the sudden urge to apologize.

At that moment, however, whatever dark determination had been keeping Loki upright must have failed, because he collapsed. Or what have, if not for Thor. He bent and gathered his brother into

his arms with an ease that no mortal man could have managed. Loki was scrawny, but there was more than six feet of him, and he was dressed in armor. Thor's actions were so natural, Darcy knew she was watching a scene that had played out many times before and the thought made her ache inside. Glancing at Jane, she saw the same realization on her face.

Loki hung like broken doll in Thor's arms, eyes closed. Remembering the weird death look in his eyes, she asked "Is he alive?" and immediately reminded herself that she didn't give a crap.

Thor nodded. "Yes." He looked worried, though, dropping the false cheer. He and Loki had spent the past three weeks moving from one SHIELD facility to another. In that time, during his brief phone calls with Jane, Thor had expressed concern for his brother's condition. Not only were his wounds not healing at the accelerated rate of an immortal, they simply weren't healing at all. In the past, Thor explained, Loki had bounced back quickly from far worse than a few cuts and broken bones.

Darcy eyes panned over Loki, stopping at a slash on his throat. Something about the wound didn't make sense to her since it looked like an obvious attempt to kill him. Wasn't torture ultimately about keeping the victim very much alive?

Movement caught her eyes and she looked down, seeing a couple of spots of red on the tan carpet. Her eyes tracked upward to Loki's right arm that hung limp, a crimson stain on the bandages on his hands.

"Dude," she said, "Your brother's making a mess on the carpet." Then in typical impulsive Darcy style, she moved closer and with a grimace, latched a finger under the bracer on his lower arm and started to lift his arm. It was heavier than expected and she had to recruit more of her fingers for the job. With an "Ew," she draped his arm over his abdomen where he could bleed on himself.

It was the first time she'd touched him and the last for several months when he didn't snarl, "Don't touch me."

When his broken hand touched his body, he jerked in pain and she felt a twinge of guilt. *Don't forget. This prick murdered Phil Coulson.* Then she made the mistake of looking at his face.

His eyelids fluttered, and a sliver of green studied her without recognition or emotion. Nevertheless, it felt as though the floor shifted beneath her feet, and her vision swam with abrupt dizziness. A freakish wave of prescience washed over her as she suddenly knew he would be important to her, and not necessarily in a bad way. She shuddered, her sense of equilibrium obliterated: up was down, mice chased cats, politicians were honest, dirt tasted like chocolate and chocolate, like dirt. She shuffled backward, eyes still locked on his.

"Darcy, would you go? Please."

"To town?" she said, blankly, unable to turn away from Loki's face. Inside, self control battered at the icy hold of the weird connection between them. Distantly she heard Jane's voice. His eyes closed and she took another step back. She fumbled around in the dark of her confusion and found an ember of hate. Unfortunately, she still couldn't fire it up into more than adolescent angst.

"You don't bandage rotten meat," she said, sullenly, "You throw it out."

At this, even Jane, who also hated Loki, said, "Darcy!"

When she met Thor's eyes, she saw hurt and felt like a total shit. "He's a prince of Asgard," he said, "and...my brother."



"I'll go, okay?" She left the house muttering "Princess of Ass," and wishing she could just shut up.

The plan had been simple: Loki moved in; she hated him. Stupid, squishy emotions like pity weren't suppose to cancel her loathing party. (She had imaginary balloons and streamers imprinted with "Loki sucks.") She turned her car left onto Don Tenorio Road, taking the long route into town because no way was she hurrying for him.

Just before she reached the Richards's place, she slowed the car and pulled over in front of their front gate. The two pit bulls, Meteor and Rocket, rose, tails wagging and mouths open in panting canine grins. Neil Richards like to say that the only things between his belongings and a burglar were the dogs' ferocious looks--literally. Neither animal had a mean bone in its body.

*I, on the other hand, am a total bitch.*

She licked her lips, and wished she could go somewhere, drink herself silly and get stupid with a really cute boy. Except the nearest cute boy here in the middle-of-nowhere-and-nothing was that guy in accounting--Sean? --and the most she'd ever gotten from him was a distant smile. Plus the thought of spending the next morning with her face in the toilet, playing host to the mother of all hangovers, diminished the short term appeal of getting loaded now.

Meanwhile, the two dogs poked their muzzles through the metal gate, recognizing the person in the car as someone who snuck them treats. Rocket let out a frustrated high-pitched bark.

What the hell happened back there? Did Loki hit her with some kind of minion-making power? She snorted. If the best he could do for an army now was Darcy and her Taser, he deserved pity.

Meteor joined Rocket in a sad chorus of canine frustration and she smiled, feeling determination slowly washing away anger. She had made her choice. Yeah, she could be in New York now with Erik, but she had opted to stay and help Jane. *And you're doing a kick-ass job, Darcy, acting like a pissy twelve-year-old.*

With a silent promise to bring the dogs their treats tomorrow, she made a U-turn and headed for the short cut into town.

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When Darcy got home, Jane was in the kitchen, staring into one of the cabinets. "None of our glasses match," she said, responding to Darcy's puzzled look.

"Neither does the silverware. Or the furniture." Darcy nodded at the red faux leather couch and plaid green easy chair in the living room. "So?"

"Thor...and Loki, they're princes."

"Homeless princes," responded Darcy, hanging her car keys on the peg by the door. "If they want pomp and circumstance, they should stay with the Queen of England, not us." Jane nodded, looking unconvinced.

"Where'd they go?" asked Darcy.

"Erik's room, I mean..." Jane met Darcy's eyes. "I guess it's Thor and Loki's room now, right?"

"We'll make them a little sign that says, 'Keep Out,'" said Darcy, not yet aware how appropriate that would be given Loki's temperament. She raised the white plastic bag full of bandages, tape, and whatever else at the pharmacy had looked useful for patching up failed supervillains. "I'll take

this to Thor."

Stalling, she stopped by her room to leave her purse, and then steeling herself, knocked on the half open door across the hall. "Red Cross, we deliver."

The door open and Thor said, with a smile, "Darcy, come in."

Hesitant, she moved just a step into the room, eyes everywhere but on the man on the second bed. "Everything but a doctor." She handed him the bag. "About, uh, earlier...I'm sorry. My mouth doesn't come with a censor, or sometimes, a brain."

Thor's response was to give Darcy a big hug; Darcy's, to hug back, and squeeze in some PG-rated groping, because...Thor...yum.

Next, Darcy returned to the kitchen where Jane now stood before the open refrigerator. The fridge started beeping. The little alarm always went off if the door was open more than two minutes. With a sigh, Jane shut and reopened it.

Darcy stood beside her and helped her stare down the food. "What's the matter," she asked, "Our groceries don't match, either?"

"We have a half empty bottle of peanut butter, stale bread, three eggs, bacon, five beers," Jane open the vegetable drawer, "broccoli, a head of lettuce and one apple."

"Should broccoli be furry?" asked Darcy.

"No," whined Jane. "How are we supposed to feed them?"

"Beer and bacon are essential nutrients for growing superheroes and archenemies." At Jane's forced smile, she put her arm around her and hugged. "We can run down to Albuquerque tomorrow, maybe try that warehouse store."

"I don't think we have enough freezer space to buy in bulk."

"We'll get an extra freezer. There's space in the utility room." She tightened the hug. "Cute guy in accounting smiled at me yesterday. Maybe I can convince him to approve a freezer as an work expense."

"What have I done?" said Jane, mournfully.

"A very bad thing," said Darcy with a grin. "You will be punished." The fridge started beeping again, but she ignored it, instead opening the freezer. "With ice cream."

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In retrospect, Darcy realized with a wry smile, Thor and Loki had made the house feel all the more like home. Though the four often ordered pizza or takeout from Izzy's, some of their meals were home cooked and the fridge stocked with un-furry food. With Thor's help, Jane and Darcy painted their rooms. With SHIELD's help, thanks to Sean's creative accounting, they got new living room furniture and a widescreen TV. Jane went on an online buying spree, finding inexpensive sets of glassware and silverware, so Asgard's wayward princes didn't have to suffer the indignity of mismatched place settings.

Loki healed and turned out to be as gorgeous as everyone claimed, although his personality would try the patience of a saint. Thor and Jane tiptoed around him as though he were an abused animal

that could be tamed with kindness. Darcy, however, treated him like a misbehaving dog, using her snark like a rolled-up newspaper, metaphorically smacking him on the nose. Verbally bitch slapping Loki was so much fun, she forgot to hate him.

And somehow their antagonism evolved into a spiky friendship.

Darcy lay in bed on her side, studying Loki's rose. The Sunday morning sunlight, broken into bright yellow stripes by the blinds, cast the flower in contrasting planes of brilliant red and shadowed black. The rose filled her with a powerful longing and the achy worry that she'd done something really stupid.

Sitting up, she rubbed her hands over her face. "...kiss me or get the hell out of my space before my girl parts explode"? Seriously?" She groaned. Yeah, he'd kissed her--and oh, wow, she could still feel that kiss all the way down to her toes--but judging by his expression afterward, smooching a mortal was an embarrassing mistake.

She got up and headed for the shower. The clock radio said 7:47, which was obscenely early for a Sunday morning, but it wasn't like she could sleep anyway, not with the memory of the kiss infecting her with fizzy energy. Plus, at this hour, there was no chance of a run-in with the owner of said fabulous lips. Left to his own devices, Loki stayed up until two or three and didn't get up until noon.

Forty minutes later, she stopped by the front door, and took the keys to Jane's SUV from the peg by the door and left the house. Inkblot was stretched out on the porch, sunning in the cool morning air, but the sun had already turned the SUV into an oven. She turned on the vehicle, rolled down the windows and with one last glance at the house, drove away.

The round trip to Albuquerque took six hours. Enough time maybe to figure out whether she'd completely fucked up her friendship with Loki. Then there was Sean, but he didn't have to know about Loki's kiss, did he?

Unlike quaint Puente Antiguo, most of Albuquerque look like any other western American city, a sprawling ocean of housing subdivisions, interrupted by seas of strip malls and fast food restaurants. Her route to Costco took her over the tree-lined Rio Grande River, which was the extent of the picturesque part of the journey.

In the store, she piled the shopping cart high with "essentials" like food, toilet paper and three cases of Thor's favorite craft beer. Outside, she loaded the frozen and cold stuff into a couple of big coolers so it would survive the long trip home. Her hip ached and she regretted not calling Sean and asking him to come along.

*Sean. Loki.* "Love triangle" was a generous definition for what was happening. Lopsided triangle, maybe. Sean was cute but if Darcy actually thought Loki was interested, she'd... *I'd what?*

Back on the highway, she set the vehicle's cruise control to 70 mph, and moved her thoughts to more productive tangents. Namely, did Peter Edwards and Mark King have anything to do with Andy and Max's death? If SHIELD took her theory seriously, they should have already done their own investigating. Big, tall-as-a-skyscraper, "if."

Either way, it wouldn't hurt to do some snooping, though the thought of another confrontation with the Duo of Drunk and Disorderly made her stomach hurt. If she wasn't careful, she ran the risk of turning into a too-stupid-to-live character in a horror movie, marching off on her own when everyone knows you never leave the group unless you want to be monster chow.

She didn't lie when she told Jane that she was afraid. Last night, she'd slept all right, but the two previous nights, she had awoken from a horrible nightmare. She couldn't remember the details, just the suffocating fear. When she got up and wandered into the dark living room, she wished Loki would be up as well, and dreaded that he would be. Had she found him there, she would have glommed so tightly onto him that no amount of snarls or threats to turn her into bug would have peeled her away.

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She spotted Thor first as she slid the SUV into its spot before the house. He was standing by the metal storage shed, attention on the open door, late afternoon sun in his golden hair. He looked like a prince despite his faded jeans and gray, fitted T-shirt. Darcy got out and walked stiffly over to him.

"I wish I had this stuff back when I didn't have funding. It's amazing," Jane's voice said from inside the shed.

"Darcy, you are limping again," observed Thor as she approached.

Loki, who was crouched in shed, back to her, wearing black and green Asgard-lite, looked over his shoulder. "Your hip still troubles you?"

"I might have overdone it a little."

Jane's face appeared in the doorway. "Didn't Sean go with you?"

Loki turned quickly back to whatever he was doing and Darcy stammered, "He, uh, I, er, thought I could handle it on my own."

"This might work." Loki stood, long legs unfolding gracefully and making Darcy's mouth water, and handed Jane something that looked like a circuit board with antennae.

"Right. We just need another capacitor." Jane spun around and reached for a tall shelf. Standing on tiptoes, she pulled down a small cardboard box. "One of these will do."

Thor squinted in the sunlight, eyes moving from the SUV to the shed, probably calculating the distance. "The supplies must be moved into the house," he said pointedly to Loki. It was more than a hundred feet to the SUV and back into the house.

Loki nodded. "We're done here." Stopping before Darcy, he said, a little coolly, "Are you in pain? Do you need...help?"

*You could help me out of my clothes; I'll help you out of yours and we'll...sigh.* Taken back by his detached demeanor, she just shook her head. He nodded absently and followed Thor. Darcy didn't moved, watching as Jane snapped the padlock on the shed.

"Something's wrong with Loki," said Jane as they followed the men.

"You could write a book on what's wrong with Loki," replied Darcy.

"He hasn't snarled at Thor all day."

Ahead, Thor handed Loki two cases of beer, while he hefted the other and both coolers with ease and they headed for the house. At this, Darcy conceded Jane's point. "He's helping Thor. Isn't that one of the signs of the Apocalypse?"

Jane laughed. "Time to stock up on duct tape and canned goods. The end is nigh."

Loki and Jane, it turned out, were cobbling together the parts for her magic detector. Once the groceries were unloaded, they sat at the kitchen table, fiddling with the techo-bits borrowed from Tony Stark's big collection of crap. If either had lingering concerns about setting Darcy loose on Puente Antiguo to sniff out supernatural murderers, they'd forgotten them in the rush of geekish excitement to build a better magic detector.

Long car trips made Darcy sleepy and it was Jane and Thor's night to make dinner, so she went to her room and took a nap. Later, throughout dinner, Loki remained distant, polite and un-growly, but largely silent. Afterwards, she plunked down next to him on the couch. He was reading Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove*.

"Loki Odinson's grand tour of American literature now turns to westerns," said Darcy, expecting the surname to generate a vicious reply.

His only response was a mild shrug and twitch of an eyebrow.

*Well, shit.*

She nudged him. "Can we talk? Out in the lair?"

He eyed her, expression wary. "All right." Putting down the book, he rose and offered her a hand. She took it since, even after a couple Tylenols, her hip hurt. Once she was up, he let go and made for the door. She followed, a hard ache in her stomach.

When he took his usual aisle seat two rows back, she pushed past him, past his long legs and sat at his side. She wasn't going to let him use the aisle as a buffer between them.

"I don't want things to get weird between us," she said.

"Weird?" He looked at her out of the corner of his eye.

"Yeah. Like now. You're all...polite."

His mouth twitched with a smile, the first all evening. "Would you rather I built another army and 'broke a city?'"

"I'd rather you didn't have a stick so far up your butt it's about to poke out the top of your head."

"Your use of metaphor is always...colorful."

"This sucks," she continued. "I want us back. Snarky Darcy, snotty Loki. If this is about the kiss, don't worry about it. It was no big deal. I'm not naming our future kids or planning the wedding, or anything. It was just the wine talking."

"The wine?"

"Damned chatty wine." She mimed a yapping mouth with her hand. "Blah, blah, blah."

The lines of his face lengthened, and something moved across his face that was nearly vulnerability, and she wondered if she was taking the right approach. Just as quickly, he shrugged it off. "Very well," he said nonchalantly.

"We're friends, again?" To this, his dark eyebrows lifted high, confusion obvious on his face. "Oh, this is where you sneer that you don't befriend mortals, right?" she said.

He pressed his lips together and she swallowed hard, remembering what they felt like on hers. "It is a revolting idea," he said, careful enunciating each word, lip curled slightly, "But given the right motivation, I might suffer such an affiliation."

It was her turn to look wary. "Motivation?"

"Among the groceries, there was a carton of ice cream."

She shook her head. "Thor's probably already devoured it."

"Unlikely. I hid it."

"Under the frozen spinach?"

"Yes and aided by bit of spellwork."

"You learn well, grasshopper," she said, laughing and he laughed back. Her heart felt lighter than it had all day. She didn't know if she'd done the right thing, blowing off the kiss, but if it got them back to normal it was worth it. Because a big part of her definition of home now included this, the sometimes spiky, occasionally warm, friendship-affiliation-whatever, that was Loki and Darcy.

# Chapter 11

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The bathroom faucet hissed as water spluttered out and then ran smoothly into the beer glass. When it was half full, Darcy swirled it around, emptied and refilled it. She slid the rose's stem back into the water and held it up to the mirror. The flower and Darcy looked normal, but the reflection also showed an arched picture window, surrounded by pinkish-tan tile, below it a large jetted tub. In reality, the only thing behind her was a white wall and a couple of towel racks. Unfazed, she switched off the light and headed for her room. The illusion was another one of Loki's experiments with optics, harmonic something or others, and science-magic stuff.

Living with Loki meant stumbling over outcomes of his various experiments. Some were more successful than others. The coffee maker, for example, now made a delicious, frothy, chocolate coffee, no matter the blend. Unfortunately, the microwave sometimes turned food into fake food, the kind of stuff used on stage or to sell dining rooms sets in furniture stores. Not one to admit defeat, when asked about the prop-making microwave, Loki would sniff and say, "I meant to do that."

In her room, she set the flower on the nightstand and opened the window a few inches to let in the cool night air.

In a few months, it would be too cold to leave the window open at all. New Mexico winters were mild, but colder than what she'd grown up with in Tempe. By December, the SUV's windows would be rimed with frost every morning and she and Jane would complain about the lack of a garage or carport. Jane would start worrying that Inkblot might freeze to death one cold night, and put out extra food. Darcy would go back to running because the bike moved too fast through the icy air, giving her face freeze.

She slid under the covers, facing the rose, and fell asleep wondering what the holidays would be like with Thor and Loki.

The nightmare came at her sideways, in the middle of a pleasant dream. It obliterated any memory of the nice dream and this time, struck at her with an almost sentient malice, making sure she remembered every detail.

*The trailer house lay before her, black and white in the darkness. She was returning from a date, or shopping, or a date. Those details were slippery and amorphous, like any other dream. The body wasn't there and then it was, stretched out, rigid, on the porch at the top of the steps, just as she remembered it a week before.*

*Electric fear running up her spine, her heart racing, she stopped at the bottom stair. Somewhere in the distance came the cries of men, angry and anguished, and the metallic clash of steel on steel. When she listened, though, all she heard was silence.*

*She stared at the body, Andy's corpse. Despite being dead and frozen, he turned his head and met her stare. "They think it's him. They're wrong," said Andy, but his mouth didn't move. Darcy opened hers but nothing came out.*

*Then it wasn't Andy but Max and he said, "They are blind to his faults."*

*"Whose faults?" she asked, but Max was gone, leaving Loki. Loki in that armor, black and gold and*

*green, the sweeping overcoat and gold bracers. Unbloodied, unmarred, like his familiar profile. The golden helm with the horns was missing, but his black hair was long again. Eyes closed, arms crossed across his chest, he resembled the likeness of a dead knight, carved on top of a casket.*

*The sounds of fighting, swords on swords, rang out, then the higher pitched screams of women and children. A shudder ran the length of Loki's body and his eyes opened. His back arched and face wrenched in agonized pain. With a cry, he rolled onto his side, facing her, knees bent toward his belly. He coughed and blood spilled from his mouth.*

*Panting in pain, his emerald eyes were bright, manic and staring at somewhere Darcy could never see. Between clenched teeth, he said, "Blind to his crimes." His sightless eyes suddenly looked startled and then the light fled his eyes.*

*Darcy hurried up the stairs, except in dreams you can never really hurry. Three steps behaved like twenty and by the time she reached the top, and touched his face, the warmth had fled his skin.*

*"Loki, no." She pulled his head into her lap. His hair was short again, ragged and needing a decent cut. "No, Loki, no." Staring at the front door, she tried to cry for help, "Thor!" but it came out a whisper because it's also impossible to scream in dreams.*

*A night bird called out above her and she looked at a sky that was both familiar and alien. Around her the tall trees were broken, flattened and burning. The dead man wasn't Loki, but she had loved him well and she sobbed and pushed her fingers through his hair. His face was a ruin of burned skin and white bone, but she knew him by his clothes and the sword at his side. Looking toward the north, to the mountains, she called a name, summoning the missing, but her voice was small and broken.*

*Strong hands closed on her shoulders and pulled her up and away from the body. Numb, she let herself be led away, a thick wall hastily built between her mind and everything beyond. At the same time, she tried to shrug off the hands, snapping, "I said, no. Are you fucking deaf?"*

*Her mental barrier was imperfect because she could feel the small stones and bits of forest litter under the cloak he'd thrown on the ground. His kiss was sloppy and uncomfortable and their weight made the dorm room bed squeak angrily.*

*"...would you submit and bear the unbearable or would you fight?"*

*Walled away, she watched, detached, as he peeled away clothing in a manner that was probably meant to be alluring; she listened, deaf to whispered words of endearment in a language she didn't understand, anyway.*

*She fought, punching and kicking. When his hand, which stank of sweat and cheap beer, went over her mouth, she chomped down on its palm like it was a thick steak.*

*In the end, it didn't matter. She fell back in time to the day she was betrothed; he hit her so hard that she bit her tongue and lost track of time.*

*The stars still glittered in the blue blackness of the familiar-unfamiliar sky, but morning's dim glow lit the far horizon. She trudged up the hill, the length of rope in her hand. Standing below the lowest limb of the old tree, she tied the noose, bending and pulling rough rope through coils as her beloved had taught her, though not for this purpose.*

*She shook her head, more afraid than she'd ever been, heart thundering in her ears. No, stop! It wasn't worth this. This was defeat.*



*But she threw the other end of rope over the limb anyway.*

*"No!" But her protest was in vain. The coarse material bit into her neck...*

And Darcy awoke, tearing at the sheet and pillow around her head. In a dumb animal panic, she lunged out of bed and across the room. Hitting the light switch, she pressed her back to the wall, blinking through the sudden glare at the familiar confines of her room. Her eyes settled on the crimson rose and remained there, an anchor to which she affixed a frantic "It was just a dream, just a dream, just a dream, just..." The choking weight of the dream lifted, but an overpowering, mindless dread remained.

She turned, opened the door and slipped into the hallway, heart still racing, spectral fingers on her shoulders, a rope tightening around her neck.

Loki's door was rimmed in faint yellow light.

"Loki. Are you up?" She knocked on his door and stood there shifting from one foot to another as seconds became long minutes. She glanced at Jane's door, knowing she was desperate enough for company to wake sleeping beauty and her prince. Just as she was about to move toward Jane's, Loki's door opened.

"I had a dream. A nightmare." If she hadn't been so completely doped up by terror, it would have occurred to her that Loki, who had probably caused enough horrific dreams himself, wasn't exactly the go-to-guy for comfort.

Which was probably why he looked so utterly perplexed, a thick leather bound book still in his hand. She took a step toward him and his expression changed. He cocked his head to the side, face suddenly calculating, almost wary. With a flick of his wrist, the book disappeared. He looked up and down the hallway as if he expected to find someone else there.

"Good, do that," Darcy muttered, unhappily, "Because I'm not freaked out enough."

He moved forward, and brushed past her and she noted he was wearing the black pajamas. "Come," he said, starting toward the living room.

Staring into the pitch black darkness of the rest of the house, she remained rooted to the floor.

"Please," he tried, irritably. When she still didn't move, he closed the distance between them, took her hand and then hissed something in a strange language. Taking her other hand, he said, "Your hands are like ice."

She shivered, finding that the rest of her was as well. "Yours are hot, scalding."

He let go and went into her room, moving from one end to the other in a few long strides. She watched as he surveyed the room, hands sometimes moving over the furniture, steely gaze sweeping over everything, an angry black-clothed wraith cataloging all. Her teeth chattered and she wondered if she shouldn't have gotten Jane and Thor, after all.

Returning, he stopped, one hand on the doorframe. "Did you see anything? When you awoke?"

"No. What's going on?"

Rather than an answer, he lifted a hand, fingers wide, palm upward. His hand closed into a quick fist, and the sound of many tiny things popping echoed throughout the house. "Fury's electronic ears."

"You fried them all? Why haven't you done that before?"

He smirked. "I thought it prudent to leave him his illusion of control." Taking her hand again, he led her to the living room, turning on the ceiling light and lamp with wave of a hand.

"You can do that magic easy enough," she noted.

He gestured at the couch and she sat. "I could do that sort of magic when I was a child," he replied, sitting next to her, turned slightly, his knee touching hers. Taking both her hands, he rubbed his thumbs over her cold flesh. "What did you see in the dream?"

Darcy stared at his hands around hers and wondered if he had been an adorable kid. Probably not, actually. Really cute children grew up to be weird looking adults. She told him about the nightmare, as best she could.

"I think I know where the second part came from," she said at the end. "Thor's stories of battles. I mean, dreams are just the brain collecting crap from waking life and throwing it on the screen to see what sticks, right?"

"You reek of magic," he said, bluntly.

"I what? No shit."

"Yes...shit. I suspect I'm the cause." He appraised her coolly, eyes halting on her chest.

"I'm cold. It makes the ladies perky," she said pointedly and he flashed her a wicked grin that made the matter worse. It was probably time to invest in something besides threadbare T-shirts for pajamas. *Or, maybe not*, she thought as his eyes tracked toward her breasts again.

"My nightmares are another one of your tricks? Can we go back to coyote-lizards in the shower, because these dreams, are like...hurting me."

He shook his head. "I didn't send you the nightmare. But when I allowed you to feel the killer's magic, I must have awakened a latent sensitivity."

"I can do magic?" she said, "Bitchin'."

"I wouldn't apply for Hogwarts, just yet," he said dryly. "By sensitivity, I mean you are like a weak radio receiver, picking up only the strongest signals, with no ability to broadcast."

"The nightmare was someone's psycho magic podcast?" She suddenly knew what the term "cold sweat" felt like as the memory of the dream--Loki's death, the noose around her neck--made her teeth start chattering again, even as damp beads of perspiration built up on her skin.

"That's an apt description. It may have carried aspects of the killer's dream." Releasing her hands, he leaned forward, elbows on his knees. Other than a dim scar where his right thumb joined his hand, neither hand showed any sign of the horrific damage from months before. His hair was mussed, probably where it had been smooshed against a pillow. He flinched when she reached out and tried to smooth it against his head, but tolerated her fiddling in silence.

Thinking better, she changed her mind and ruffled her fingers through the silky, ink-black strands, making it worse. "If so, he or she is dreaming of your death."

"Who isn't?" He turned, grinning over his shoulder, looking like a messy-haired dark angel.

"Me, at least, not intentionally" she replied, through teeth that still were determined to chatter. "And Jane's hunky bed warmer, the one who keeps calling you his brother."

The grin faded and his green eyes turned ice cold. He turned away, and beneath her hand, now on his shoulder, muscles tensed. She could sense his nasty retort's impending arrival and she couldn't handle that just now. Before he could speak, she asked, "The part with you...gone, that couldn't be true. Because you can't really die, right?"

He said nothing for a minute and then his leg started to twitch. "Everything dies, Darcy."

Across the room, she caught sight of their murky reflections on the television's dark screen, both their faces pale and luminescent. "Odin's spell, the one that velcros you and Thor together like a couple of mismatched socks? It can really kill you?"

"Socks," he muttered, shooting her a quick glance, mild humor in his eyes. "Yes. It's a masterwork, a vast network of threads connected to my magic, which, when triggered, causes a chain reaction, turning my magic on itself." His tone had a measure of admiration in it.

"How do you know it even works? Maybe you could stroll out the door right now and make yourself supreme overlord of New Mexico."

She saw the shadow of his grin in the reflection. "I prefer king. It's far more elegant." Bending forward, he set his forehead against the heel of both hands. "Fury demanded a test."

"Poor Thor," said Darcy, knowing it must have just about killed him to test the spell on his brother.

"Poor *Thor*?" Loki said, giving her a look of utter disbelief.

"Well, poor you, too," she said, actually feeling mildly chagrined.

Sitting up straight, he glowered down at her. "And how many times have you begged Thor for a demonstration of the spell's effectiveness?"

"Never, because that would be cruel?" She tilted her head and blinked in wide-eyed innocence.

"As I've said before, leave the lies to me."

Trying another approach, she smiled at him and said, "I'm a scientist, right? I'm all about the experiments."

"You have your charms. Scientific aptitude isn't one of them."

"Huh. Says you. I'm queen of the lab." She shivered again and wrapped her arms around herself.

"You're still cold." He considered her for moment, then looked away, expression pained, as if twisted by an internal debate. Either that or he'd sat on a tack.

With a small exasperated sigh, he put an arm around her shoulder and gathered her against his side. Their eyes met, then they looked away, vaguely embarrassed.

"The words were," he said, "'They think it's him. They're wrong.' And, 'They are blind to his faults,' then 'Blind to his crimes.' Correct?"

Snug against the warm crook of his shoulder, she nodded. "What does it mean? Is 'him,' you?"

"I'm not sure. After all, you'd be hard pressed to find anyone who is blind to my faults or crimes."

"Thor, maybe, but that would be a 'he,' not 'they.'"

"You didn't include yourself that time," he observed.

"You have your charms," she said, eyes on their reflection, "but crimeless and faultless aren't any of them." He twitched with a mild laugh and she pressed closer to him, drinking in his heat. "Could the killer be a woman? The last part of the dream, where the ra---..." she could feel his eyes on hers in the reflection, "in the forest, that was a woman's memory." *Nightmare*.

In the reflection, she saw him turn and look at her. *Don't ask. I don't want to talk about it.* What possessed her to tell him *everything* about the dream?

"Perhaps, although the dream narrative would suggest that the woman is dead."

"Ugh! Tell me I'm don't have a head full of dead person dreams, because there's not enough brain bleach for that."

"I can't tell you what you want to hear," he said, rubbing her shoulder absently, "because I don't know." Even in the fuzzy reflection she could see the bitterness on his face.

"Can you make it stop?" She closed her eyes and leaned her head against his shoulder, listening to the thump of his heartbeat. "Turn down my mojo receiver? I can't take another one of those dreams."

When he didn't answer, she opened her eyes and lifted her face to look at him. He was watching her, expressionless, but his eyes swept her face, stopping on her mouth. For a second, she thought he might kiss her again, which would have been awesome, since at least, this time she didn't ask. Instead he said, "There are things I could do...but I'm reluctant to tamper with you. Your mind, specifically."

"If this goes on, I'm going to have to rob a bank to pay for all the therapy I'll need. Do whatever you need to."

"No," he said, flatly. "I won't risk it. My magic is too unreliable."

"My rose worked; you got the Asgard music on my iPod. And the jinxed coffee maker? You could rule the world with an army of chocolate coffee makers."

"Ah, had I only known..." A smile broke through his grim visage and he pressed his forehead against hers, eyes closed. Darcy decided he could rule her with just that damned smile.

With a sigh, he pulled away and frowned down at her. "There's a reason you call me Mad Science."

"I know," she said, her voice pleading, "But I don't want to go there again, I can't remember--"

"I understand that, but--" he snapped. His eyes closed and she could see him struggling to control his anger. Letting him deal with his temper, she leaned her head against him again, closing her eyes. His chest rose and fell with slower breaths and his fingers traced warm circles on her upper arm.

"I might be able to manage something," he said, after a few minutes. "On the order of the magic detector, except it would send out a frequency that could block magical resonance."

"Mmmm," she said, sleepily, "There's the Mad Science I know and love." Tucked tightly to his side, the cold was banished along with most of the dream's terror. Sleep beckoned. Knowing it was

a few steps beyond "friends," but currently beset with a case of don't-give-a-shit, she twisted sideways, burrowing against his chest, one hand grabbing a handful of shirt near his opposite shoulder. A sideways glance at their reflection told her that he was staring at her, but she couldn't make out his expression. He heaved an overdramatic sigh, but suffered her presence without comment.

"The nightmare, like the murders, is a message to me," he said.

"Message? As in, 'Howdy, I hate you?'" she tried to say, most of the comment muffled by her face snuggled in his shirt.

"Or, 'I know who you are.'" He shrugged. "Or perhaps, 'I admire your work.'"

"Goody. Crazy fan."

He moved so fast, her brain didn't realize what had happened. She was suddenly sitting upright, unsteadily, held by his hands on her upper arms. "If you insist on playing detective, don't go alone." His penetrating gaze pinned her eyes to his. "Take the boy with you, if you must. And procure another weapon."

"Boy?" Her groggy mind lurched blindly and stumbled on a name. "Oh, Sean, right. The other vertex of the triangle."

"Vertex? Triangle?"

"I mean...accountant."

He took her hand and stood. "It hardly seems possible, but you are making less sense than usual. Back to bed."

She leered at him sleepily, and he set his attention on the floor and hauled her to her feet.

"What if the dream comes back tonight?" she said, coming to a hard stop in her doorway, pulling back against his hand.

He swept the room with a long look, posture weary. Releasing her hand, he gestured at her bed. "Go."

Here in her room, usually her safe place, the fear began to grow in the pit of her stomach, along with a cold that numbed her fingers. In two long strides, Loki was at the window, which he shut the mundane way with muscle, not magic.

He regarded her, expressionless mask in place. "I'll stay with you." She arched an eyebrow at him and he added, "On the floor. I'm sleeping on the floor."

She studied him for a beat, and then shuffled to her bed. As much as her mouth wanted to note that floors weren't for sleep, while beds were perfectly designed for sex which led to even better sleep, her body reminded her that she was going to be a sleep-deprived zombie tomorrow morning. Before she settled in, she handed him a couple of pillows, and watched as he stretched out on his side, back to her, a few feet away. "That can't be comfortable."

"I've slept on far worse," he said. With a wave of his hand, the door swung shut and the light turned to dark.

The third time the clock radio went off, tuned to a station that belted out mariachi music, Darcy hit "off" instead of "snooze." Loki's rose glittered happily in the weak morning light. Its conjurer, however, was sprawled on his back, looking dead to the world, one arm over his abdomen, the other stretched from his side. His face was turned in her direction, black hair in disarray. Staring at his eerily young face, stripped by sleep of the usual cynicism or anger, she felt a fondness that took her breath away.

Stepping over him, she got a pair of pants from the closet, intentionally rattling the door loudly. No reaction. Opening and closing her dresser drawers noisily didn't wake him either.

In the shower, she noted that the bruises on her hip had faded to dull brownish purple. Maybe tomorrow, she'd try riding her bike again.

Loki was still in the same position when she returned. She nudged his ribs with a toe. His eyelids fluttered. Reassured that he was still among the living, she made for the kitchen, lured by the smell of chocolate-y coffee.

Several minutes later, as she munched on cereal and sipped coffee, a door opened, then another. "Loki?" said a deep male voice. "Loki!" The voice's owner appeared a minute later. "Darcy, have you seen Loki?"

"Try the floor in my room," she said cheerfully.

Thor stared at her, the obvious question bright in his blue eyes. He probably would have asked, since the alternative was dealing with his brother. Compared to Loki-in-the-morning, Loki, destroyer of cities and brother killer, was positively cuddly.

But he was distracted by Jane, who called from her room, "Did you find him?"

"I believe so," said Thor. With one last confused look at Darcy, he turned for her room. She picked up the remote control from the table and switched on the TV. The local weatherman was predicting rain, which meant blue skies all day. Turning up the volume, she went back to breakfast. In the bedroom, Thor grumbled and Loki made noises that sounded like a combination of Nazgul and rabid wolf.

On the television, the perky morning news anchor went through the usual litany of bank robberies, crooked politicians, and petty larcenies.

Jane was the next to arrive in the kitchen. She poured a cup of coffee and got a breakfast bar from a cabinet above the sink. "Okay," she said, sitting across from Darcy, "Why was Loki sleeping on the floor in your room?"

"Because the bed was too small?" replied Darcy with a wink.

Jane's brown eyes widened and Darcy laughed. "If you ever lose your mind, Jane, just look in the gutter." After a sip of coffee, she explained, "I had a bad dream, a magical nightmare. Loki stayed in my room to chase off the boogie man."

"A dream about what?"

"Andy and Max's killer." She told Jane about the dream, leaving off one detail, though.

"The killer is sending Darcy nightmares," Jane said to Thor as he strolled into the kitchen.

"So Loki tells me," he said, pouring himself a coffee and then dropping a couple of Pop-Tarts in

the toaster. "This seems all the more reason not to go running about town on your own, Darcy."

"If we don't figure this out, your bro could be sleeping on my floor forever."

"He's slept in far worse places, Darcy." Thor's eyes twinkled with humor and a sly smile played on his mouth. "If he didn't wish to be at your side, he wouldn't bother. This is, after all, Loki, we are talking about."

She shrugged. "Maybe I want my privacy." *Liar, liar*. "I'll talk to Sean today. If he'll agree to come with me, we'll go into town tonight. See if we can pick up anything interesting."

"I'd like to know if that thing Loki and I rigged up works," said Jane with a guilty grin.

Darcy chased the remaining cereal bits around the milk with a spoon. "If you could convince your brother to stop dressing like a refugee from Comic Con, you two could come with me."

Thor's smile turned sad. "Though, of late, he's taken to speaking to me in full sentences, I'm not such an 'oaf' as to mistake that for genuine affection." He rubbed a hand over the back of his head. "If anyone could convince him, it would be you."

Could she? She'd never really tried, having spent most of the past six months clinging to the idea that she hated him.

On the television, the chirpy news anchor was doing a segment on what to do in New Mexico this week. A huge white puppet loomed on the screen, wreathed in flames, twisting as it burned. Darcy licked her lips, an idea blossoming in her head.

"You ever been to Zozobra, Jane?"

Jane, already scrolling through research stuff on her iPad, replied, absently, "No."

Zozobra, or Old Man Gloom, was the name of a huge marionette that was burned every year at the start of the Fiestas de Santa Fe. The embodiment of gloom and the year's past worries, Zozobra's fiery end symbolized the release of old miseries. It was a big event, with tens of thousands of people gathering in a park in Santa Fe to watch the 50-foot tall marionette go up in flames.

Darcy studied Thor, wondering what Loki would look like in Midgard clothing. In blue jeans and a plaid shirt, Thor was still totally crushable, but he passed as ordinary human.

As usual, Loki wandered into the kitchen last, black hair still damp from the shower. He got a cup of coffee and then pawed through the vegetable bin in the fridge, coming out with a couple of oranges and an apple.

Sitting next to Darcy, he said, grumpily, "You could have woken me."

"Nuh-uh. I like all my fingers and toes." Her cereal was all milk now and no cereal. She picked up the box and dumped more in the bowl. "Why do you have to be such drama princess in the morning?"

Loki removed the skin from an orange, the rind peeling away in neat strips, aided by magic. "What would you do if awakened by that hairy visage every morning?" He gestured with his eyes at his brother.

Thor stood backlit by the kitchen window, a mug of coffee in one hand, Pop-Tart in the other. Darcy's eyes slid over his muscular arms and she managed, just barely, not to drool. Turning to

Loki, she said, "You do know I'm straight, right?"

Confusion lengthened his angular face, followed by comprehension. His shoulders slumped as he rolled his eyes and turned his focus on the other orange, which he flayed completely with an angry twist of a hand. The rind ripped and parted from the fruit with a sickening wet squish.

"Ouch," said Darcy in sympathy, to the orange.

Thor, who had been watching them with an indecipherable expression on his face, said, "Darcy's dream would suggest the murderer isn't human. Those men, Edwards and King, aren't likely culprits, then?"

"It's not that simple," replied Loki. "They could be agents for the murderer. Or they might not even be human themselves." He slid a section of orange into his mouth, chewed and swallowed. "Or it could be someone else entirely."

"Exactly," agreed Darcy, snagging a section of orange and popping it into her mouth. "Sean and I will check out Edward's repair shop. If we don't find any trace of magic--"

"You'll cease this game of detective?" said Thor, a little too hopefully.

"--we can assume that Edwards and King are just random Loki haters."

"You're just going to wander around on the outside of the building, right?" asked Jane. "You won't try to get inside?"

"That would be breaking and entering, and really wrong," replied Darcy with overcooked sincerity. Thor and Jane nodded, placated. But out of the corner of her eye, she saw Loki smirk knowingly. She kicked his foot but the smirk just got broader.

As Jane's SUV carried them to work, she cast Loki sideways looks, trying to form a picture of what he'd look like in regular street clothes. Like Thor, he'd still be eye candy, but if he could keep his mouth shut and not blather on about glorious purposes and insignificant mortals, no one would recognize him.

Today was Monday. Zozobra happened on Thursday night. Which meant she had four days to try and convince Loki to get out and mingle with the human race absent subjugation and alien armies. She had a better chance of training a cat to play fetch.

She smiled anyway. Just a while ago, she had thought magic didn't exist, and now she had seen, felt and even tasted it. Nothing was impossible and Darcy was up to a challenge.



## Chapter 12

### CHAPTER TWELVE

At ten-thirty that morning, Darcy slumped back in her chair, took her glasses off and blew a hard breath at a few stray hairs that fell over her eyes. Except for the low murmur of Jane's voice as she talked on the phone, the Fish Bowl was deathly, boringly quiet.

There were no voicemails on either SHIELD's landline or her cell (because there was no coverage in the bowels of the earth). She logged onto Facebook, but found that all her friends' posts had reached a critical level of dull. Most reposting the same round of cute cat pictures or the ultimate demand for attention, "I'm sick." It was an Internet axiom: even the most pathetic troll, ignored and reviled by all, could post those two words and the online community would mobilize a goodwill effort on par with saving Ferris Bueller.

Hands poised over the keyboard, she almost typed, "I have fatal monkey pox, please send chocolate," but instead logged off.

She twirled a pen between her fingers, but lacking Loki's dexterity, dropped it on the desk. Scooping the pen up, she doodled a line of waves on a pad of sticky notes. Mind elsewhere, she sketched out heart. Realizing what she'd done, she stopped just before the pen's tip started the down stroke on an "L." *I'm as bad as Jane.* She darted a nervous glance at Loki, who had his back to her, fiddling around the computer.

Glasses back on, she took a closer look. He had swiped a pair of earbuds from someone, probably Thor, and was watching a movie trailer on YouTube. A comedy by the looks of it, fortunately not anything violent or explosive because the last thing the God of Mischief needed was inspiration. Thor, meanwhile, sat at the table, head on his arms. Either he'd swallowed a small growling animal or he was snoring. Jane, the only one doing work, was on the phone with the Japanese scientists again.

When Nick Fury swept into the Fish Bowl, black jacket flapping like a huge, leathery bird of prey, Darcy wondered if he'd been summoned by the overpowering slacker vibes. As usual he looked as though ass-kicking was his addiction, and his fix, Loki's blood. The target of his ire, however, spun around lazily in the chair and met the SHIELD director's stare with an expression of bored innocence.

Fury didn't bother niceties like "Good morning," instead stating bluntly, "At approximately one-thirty AM, last night, all our monitoring devices on the house went dead."

Seeing Fury, Jane muttered hasty goodbye to the Japanese scientists. Thor lifted his head from the table and blinked sleepily.

Loki leaned back in the chair, long legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles. "And you came here expecting what?" he said to Fury. "That we'd mourn the passing of your electronic pets?"

"I came to find out why." He stood, hands clasped behind his back, single eye and eye patch blazing at Loki. "The how, is obvious. You're doing magic."

"I've been doing magic since the days when you mortals believed it rained because Odin was taking a piss," said Loki, with a snarly flash of teeth. He flicked his index and middle finger and a lizard, an ordinary gray desert lizard, appeared on his thigh, pale against black leather. It scrambled

over his leg and leaped to the floor, disappearing under the printer stand. "The habit of magic is not so easily broken."

"Wait," said Jane to Loki. "You killed the bugs?" Loki nodded, eyes still on Fury. Jane smiled. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but, 'Yay, Loki!'" Fury shot her a withering glare, but to her credit, she kept smiling.

"What were you two," Fury included Darcy in his death stare, "trying to hide?"

Thor answered for them, sleep gone from his eyes, replaced with irritation. "Darcy awoke from a terrible nightmare. Loki thought her troubles no concern of yours."

Fury smirked, the expression way worse than Loki's version, especially given what he said next. "Did you two swap spit *again*, or did you," he looked meaningfully at Darcy, "let that asshole get to home base last night?"

Loki, of course, canted his head slightly to the side, expression mildly perplexed, giving nothing away. Unfortunately, he was right about Darcy. She was a terrible liar. At Fury's comment, her face burned and she shrank back in her chair.

Thor's face scrunched with confusion as he tried to work out Fury's Midgard idioms. Jane's jaw, however, dropped and she spluttered. "Y-you two...k-kissed?"

"Like hillbilly cousins, I bet." Fury was obviously please with himself. "A couple nights ago, Ms. Lewis asked Loki to kiss her and it sounded like he obliged."

"What are we," snapped Darcy, "your ear porn?" She took off her glasses, and pretended to clean the lenses, because it was easier to deal with an out-of-focus Fury. Or for that matter, Jane and Thor. Even mortified as she was, a hot spike of defiance lanced through her.

She put her glasses back on and glowered at Fury. "Yeah, I kissed him. So what? You're not the lip police of me." Because she'd already dug herself in this deep, she added, "And it was an awesome kiss. Mad Science has some wicked kissing skills." At this point, a small city could have been powered by the heat coming off her face.

The only sounds in the room were the hum of the air conditioning (still functioning properly), and fans in the computers. Jane and Fury stared at her speechless. Thor, however, studied his brother. Loki had temporarily lost his cool, and was staring blankly across the room, expression somewhere between deer-in-headlights and completely, hopelessly confused.

The quiet was broken by the squeak of Jane's chair as she stood. "Is that why you came down here?" she asked. "To complain that Loki cooked your electronic spies? Because, y-you can't expect us to give a crap." Her hands clenched into white-knuckled fists and Darcy knew she was wondering if she was losing her funding as she spoke. Nevertheless, grim resolve shone from her brown eyes. "Darcy's right. She's a grown woman. She can kiss whoever she likes."

"Uh-huh." Fury took in the room, assessing each of them in turn. "The question is, what else are these two hiding? If you're withholding information regarding the investigation into Sandoval and Padilla's deaths--"

"It was a dream, nothing more," growled Loki, regaining his usual icy composure.

"It was a nightmare," said Thor, forcefully, "brought on by Darcy's over-involvement in the matter." He and Fury locked eyes. "Perhaps if you expended more effort on finding the killer, then Darcy wouldn't be taking matters into her own hands."

"You mean her playing Nancy Drew?"

Thor blinked, the reference zipping over his head. His eyes caught Darcy's and she gave him a cue, a nod. "Yes," he said uncertainly. "She shouldn't be meddling in this business, it could be dangerous." He threw a frown in Loki's direction.

"So, stop her," snapped Fury.

"Stop her?" Loki barked a bitter laugh. "Have you ever actually met Darcy?" Despite his worried demeanor, Thor chuckled, the sentiment echoed by Jane.

Fury blinked, a little nonplussed by the united front he faced from the four. "Maybe, if you weren't having convenient memory lapses, Ms. Thing here, wouldn't be getting herself into trouble," he countered.

"You're coming to me for help?" responded Loki. "With all the resources that you command through SHIELD?" He smirked. "How far the mighty have fallen."

"You should talk," said the SHIELD director.

*Oh, crap, here we go again,* thought Darcy, seeing a venomous glitter in Loki's green eyes. But the air didn't grow thick with magic. Instead Loki smiled winningly at Fury. White teeth and round cheeks, his mien seemed outrageously friendly until she noticed his eyes, which shone with the promise of pain and dismemberment. *Yikes.* She shuddered, glad he'd never turned that smile on her.

Fury obviously didn't know what to do with that. "Your brother's still crazier than a shit house rat," he said to Thor.

Thor, who seemed torn between concern and amusement, covered his mouth and shrugged as if to say, "What can you do?"

Fury nodded curtly and turned to leave, stopping to address Darcy. "You're too smart to get involved with the likes of him."

*Don't bet on it,* she thought at his back as he stormed out of the lab. As soon as Fury left the room, the little lizard popped out from under the printer stand and skittered across the gray industrial carpet to stop before its creator. It bobbed up and down on its little legs, staring up at Loki expectantly.

"Wow! Eleven o'clock already?" Darcy pointed at the white clock on the far wall. She picked up her purse. "Gotta go. Sean and I are going Taser shopping."

Thor and Jane, who both eyed Loki as if he were a kid who'd splashed red paint all over a white couch, nodded absently at Darcy. As she left the Fish Bowl, Loki shot her a dark look, the meaning clear: *Sure, run off; leave me with these two.*

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Despite being the girl who did the lip lock with Loki, so far, Darcy continued to enjoy the benefits of relatively lax security where she was concerned. When she and Sean passed through the security gates and scanners in the old ranch house, no one questioned where they were going.

It helped to have Sean along. His actual job title was Assistant Comptroller, a high-level management position in accounting, and he had a much higher security clearance than she, or for

that matter, Jane did.

They took Sean's truck, a silver Ford Ranger. After buckling her seat belt, she rolled down the window and waved out a couple of flies that were trapped in the cab. The insects zipped off toward the nearest herd of cattle in the feedlot and a juicy pile of cow dung. Sean did the same, making a face. "Life on the farm," he observed.

The only grocery store in Puente Antiguo was three short rows of canned goods and wilted produce, and one row devoted to potato chips, cookies and everything high calorie and zero nutrition. It didn't amount to much before Loki blew the roof and walls off the place and it didn't improve after it had been rebuilt. The local gun store, on the other hand, carried everything anyone might want to make things dead, or at least wish they were dead.

Ruckley's Guns and Ammo was just two buildings away from City Hall, well out of the way of the destruction done by the Destroyer. Not only had it not suffered any damage, but the ensuing rush of paranoia brought on by the attack, had been great for gun sales. Recently, Ruckley's had expanded into the space formerly occupied by an antique store, adding a shooting range.

Sean and Darcy waited while the store's owner, Sharon Ruckley, sold several boxes of ammo and a new gun sight to a stocky man with buzz cut brown hair and the name "T. Lopez" tattooed on the back of his head.

"Bet you know a lot about guns, being a hunter, right?" she said to Sean, whose attention was on the various rifles displayed on the wall behind the counter.

"Nothing beyond a 0.22 rifle. I was a bow hunter."

"Bows are right over there," said Sharon, pointing at a large selection of composite bows and accessories on the wall behind them. Her red hair was short, spiky and tipped with pink. Her T-shirt, tight, black and with a scoop-neck collar, said "Girls with guns have more fun!"

"How'd that Taser work out for you?" she asked Darcy.

Darcy exchanged a grin with Sean. "Better than lightning."

"That baby has sizzle." She leaned across the counter, flashing a deep cavern of cleavage, her green eyes tracking from Darcy to Sean. "What can I get you today?" Sean's focus dipped briefly south, but otherwise stayed on her face.

"Another Taser, please," said Darcy. She also asked if there were any shirts that said, "Girls with Tasers have more fun," but unfortunately, Sharon said no.

Next stop was home, because the Taser was considered a weapon, and Darcy wasn't authorized to bring one into a SHIELD facility.

Sean laughed at this. "But they let you bring two Asgard princes with penchant for violence to work," he said dryly. "That makes sense."

This was the first time Sean had been out to the house. As soon as they entered the living room, Sean cast a wary look around the room, blue eyes lingering on the hallway.

"They're still at work. Trust me," assured Darcy.

Sean flashed a brief smile. "I hope so. Otherwise, you'll get to hear me scream like a little girl."

Darcy laughed. Sean didn't bother with false bravado when it came to Loki, freely admitting that he found him scary. There was something appealing about a guy who knew when he was outmatched, particularly now that she knew he was normally pretty brave.

"Wanna see my room?" asked Darcy, feeling more like a little kid showing off than an adult.

She paused at the first door in the hallway. "That's Jane's room." She thought about it and added, "Jane and Thor's room, now."

"It's like a room turned inside out," observed Sean.

"And then put in a blender."

The bed was unmade. Clothes were strewn everywhere. Some were folded, but hadn't made it into the closet or dresser. The dresser top was covered in an assortment of items ranging from the usual brushes, makeup, lotion and girly stuff, to chargers for a cell phone and iPad, a Rubik's cube, a large geode, mail, a foot-long claw that Thor said had come from a Bilchstein, and a stuffed cat wearing a sombrero. The bookcase was full, and more books, scientific journals, and notebooks were piled nearby. A stack of sports magazines, probably Thor's, were by the bed. In a corner, there was a pile of something that might have been Thor's armor. It was fortunate that Mjölnir came when called, since Thor would never find the hammer in this mess. From the doorway, the master bathroom was out of sight. A good thing because it probably hosted an accidental experiment in toxic mold.

"And Loki's." She opened his door, feeling a twinge of guilt at letting a stranger invade his privacy. Besides the addition of the second bed, the room hadn't changed much since Erik left. The only thing on the wall was a framed map of the London Underground, left by Erik. Besides the two beds, the only furniture in the room was a plain pine dresser and a short bookcase. Like Jane's, the bookcase was full, but the excess books were neatly piled on top and there was some kind of order to it all, with rough groupings of fiction, non-fiction and tomes that looked like they'd come from an ancient library. The top of the dresser was covered in mechanical and electronic bits and pieces. Loki had been filching stuff from Tony Stark's junk pile for months.

Two of Darcy's belongings were in plain sight: her laptop, on the bed, and a watch, on the dresser. She didn't bother to reclaim the watch, since it had probably fallen victim to one of his experiments. In a bizarre turn, Loki had actually asked to use the laptop. She'd said yes, hoping she wasn't aiding and abetting him in new crimes.

As far as Darcy knew, the only permanent marks Loki had made on the room were faint bloodstains on the floor by his bed. Immortal blood was impossible to get out of cheap carpet. Otherwise the room looked almost unoccupied. Keeping a room clean was easy when you could use magic.

Sean shot a quick look at Thor and Jane's room and then back at Loki's. "You can sort of see why he'd want to kill Thor. If I had to live with that mess..." He arched his eyebrows, leaving the statement unfinished. Darcy smiled. Sean was kind of neat freak.

"The powder room." She waved vaguely at the second bath. Sean did a double take at the mirror--currently showing an ultramodern bath, white and black with glass and bamboo trim. The door at the end of the hall led to the laundry and utility room and wasn't worth mentioning.

"And Darcy's pad." She led the way into her room, glad that she'd run the vacuum around recently, and that all her dirty clothes had made it into the hamper.

"Cute, but I don't see you as the flower type."

"You sound like Loki," she said, setting the new Taser on her desk.

During one of their first real conversations, Loki had stopped in her doorway and asked who had decorated the room. He'd looked surprised when she had said, "Me."

"I'd have never attributed you with such bucolic sensibilities," he had noted, taking in the flower prints and patterns.

Sean smiled distantly, surprisingly unbothered by the comparison to Loki. But in the truck, as they drove back to work, he asked, "Why do you care if he gets framed for the murders? He is a killer, after all."

"It's not fair," she answered, just as Sean turned the truck left at Izzy's Diner. The old dog that she and Jane had seen days before sat in front of a title loans shop, lazily scratching its ear with a hind paw. The shop was open again, because usury never went out of business, but most of the front facade was still bare wood sheathing, the final layer of brick absent.

"Fair?" said Sean, giving the title loan shop and other businesses in various states of repair a long look.

"He did this," agreed Darcy. "He didn't kill Max and Andy."

"A lot of people at SHIELD say he hasn't paid for what he did here and elsewhere. Families missing their fathers, sons, brothers, daughters...they don't care what he's punished for, just so long as he's punished. He's a war criminal." Sean's tone was curiously flat.

*He's my friend.* "I think he was punished...on Asgard."

Sean cocked his head, taking his eyes briefly off the road to look at Darcy. "Pam says you wouldn't know it, to look at him now. He's unscathed."

"On the outside," she said, "But on the inside, he's a train wreck. Odin gave him an Asgard lobotomy." She didn't add that he'd lost most of his magic and in the process, most of himself.

"Some people might argue that he shouldn't be alive while their loved ones are dead." He slowed the truck and stopped at the four-way intersection just outside town. On the opposite side of the road, a big truck carrying a towering load of hay waited.

The memory of her dream, Loki's dead eyes, flashed before her. "Killing Loki won't bring back the dead." She'd never been against the death penalty, but she'd also never been in the strange place she found herself now, trying to resolve the person she knew with the murderer everyone else knew.

Looking up, she found Sean studying her, his expression somewhat thoughtful and a bit perplexed. The big truck passed them, temporarily blocking the sunlight. When the light returned, it broke his distinctive bone structure into bright and dark planes. She had the impression he was teetering on the edge of an uncomfortable truth. "Yeah, but," he began uncertainly, "it will give them closure."

"Will it?"

As he turned away, she could see his dark lashes sweep up and down as confusion took over his face. "I-maybe." Behind them, a car horn sounded impatiently and they both jumped. He flipped the turn signal on and turned right, back to the SHIELD facility.

To fill the hollow space between them, Darcy said, after a few minutes, "If he takes the fall, the murderer goes free. Where's the justice in that?"

They were nearing the facility. A semi-truck hauling a grubby silver trailer filled with cattle was pulling out into the road. Darcy eyed the truck, feeling a touch of guilt and pity for the animals headed for what was undoubtedly a final destination. There were days when it was enough to make her consider becoming a vegetarian.

Sean parked the truck next to one of the familiar black SUVs and they got out. Just before they reached the building he stopped, shoving his hands into his pants pockets and smiling awkwardly. A light breeze moved over them, tousling his brown hair, and Darcy thought, *Even Mother Nature likes this guy.*

"Okay, counselor," he said, "You've made your case. I'll go with you tonight."

A little wave of anticipation rushed through her and she decided this must be how Sherlock Holmes felt when Watson came on board.

Of course, there was the little matter of her having a crush on Moriarty.

## Chapter 13

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The magic detector was the bastard offspring of a lead detector and an old GPS unit and it resembled a ray gun from an old science fiction movie.

After dinner, the four went out onto the porch to attempt to calibrate the thing. The sun had set an hour ago and the crickets and other insects of the night were starting their nighttime chorus. "Is there enough magic left to do this?" Darcy asked Loki.

"Most of the residual energy will have dissipated, but yes, there should be enough."

He crouched down at the spot where Andy's body had been found. Jane and Darcy did the same, flanking him like bookends, with Darcy setting a hand on his shoulder as if her hip still hurt (it didn't). Touching him had become a habit she couldn't break. Thor leaned against the porch railing, arms crossed over his muscular chest, watching them.

The construction of the device had involved a complicated stew of magic and techno-babble. When Loki had given her the rundown on its design, her first reaction had been to think he was giving her way too much credit, because Darcy didn't do science. The next had been surprise when some of it made sense. Either he was good at explaining stuff to the science-impaired, or by some kind of osmosis (science word!) an iota of technical knowledge had snuck into her brain.

But the operation was straightforward enough. Using the remnants of the magic on the porch's wood planks to calibrate the detector, Loki then switched it off, handed it to Darcy and had her repeat what he'd done. The process didn't require more than turning the device on, using a button to scroll through the three options on the screen--calibrate, test, and reset --choosing calibrate and holding down another button until it beeped and a number appeared on the screen.

"Change it to test mode," he said. She did and then holding down its trigger, moved the detector over the floor. It let out an obedient beep, this one lower than the calibration beep.

"It works" said Jane, "Yes!" She did a little fist pump.

Darcy licked her lips, tasting cinnamon. "Your magic is all over this," she observed. "That won't affect the calibration?"

"No, it should ignore anything that matches my signature."

She gave him a wink. "That's convenient. If I run across anything implicating you, the machine won't pick it up."

"All part of my evil plan."

Crouched at his left side, she could see the faint, and growing more so every day, scars around his eye. "Your evil plans don't always work out too well. For you."

"Mmmm. I'm a case study in villainous failure," he said, acerbically. He stood, taking Darcy's elbow and pulling her up with him. She caught him and Thor exchanging a testy glare and wondered what had happened after she left the Fish Bowl that morning. She hadn't had a chance to ask him if Thor had read him the riot act for Frenching his roommate. She really didn't want to know. Whatever occurred, neither Jane nor Thor had brought the matter up again.



An ebony SHIELD vehicle drove by, slowing when the driver saw them all out on the front porch. Darcy waved jauntily, and Thor and Jane did too, though less enthusiastically. Loki, of course, regarded the black SUV with the usual boredom, although something in his eyes suggested he was enjoying a lurid fantasy where the vehicle turned into an enormous fireball.

Picking up a small backpack from where she'd set it on the porch, Darcy unzipped it and slid in the detector. Next she pulled her cell phone from a side pocket and checked voice mail and the time. "I'm supposed to meet Sean in town in fifteen minutes."

Catching Jane's eyes, she saw her excitement mirrored there. Of course, Jane was giddy about the chance to see her invention put to the test. Darcy, however, was driven by a sense that she was finally doing something valuable. Thor and Loki had superpowers, immortality and magic. Jane, a high IQ, ambition and a PhD. Darcy was just...Darcy.

"Be careful," said Jane, a flicker of worry shadowing her enthusiasm.

"I will." She started to leave, only to be stopped by an arm across her chest. Pulled backward, she felt the immobile force of Loki's chest against her shoulders and back. Surrounded by the scent of leather, magic and him, his arm touching her breasts, not low enough to be naughty, but tantalizing in proximity, she felt a surge of insta-lust. She licked her lips nervously, aware that Jane and Thor were watching.

"Stay out of the building," he said, voice low, breath warm against her ear. Before she could formulate a snappy response, he disappeared, literally, leaving her swaying unsteadily on her feet. The muffled sound of a door closing, his bedroom door, followed.

"You know what's weird?" Darcy said to Jane. "I'm not even a little freaked out by him doing the apparating thing." Magic and science really had started to meld together: both incomprehensible, both something someone else did; both a regular part of her existence.

She had just unlocked her car door when Thor's voice called out, "Darcy, wait." He took the steps in one huge stride and marched toward the car, looking heroic despite the plaid shirt and jeans. Stopping before her, he bent his head to meet her eyes. "Should you encounter trouble, call Jane. I will come, immediately."

Darcy stared at the house. "How're you going to do that? Loki won't come into town."

"If needs be, I shall bind him hand and foot, sling him over my shoulder and drag him with me." He winked at her. "But I do not think it would come to that."

"Too bad, because that would be hilarious."

"Take care, Darcy." He clapped his big hands on her shoulders and gave her a companionable shake, like an older warrior sending the younger to battle. Except, the younger warrior would usually be another Asgardian, not a mortal woman. Her teeth rattled and a chunk of her college education fell out of her brain.

Pushing her glasses back up her nose, she forced a smile and thought, *Loki's right. He is an oaf. Big and sweet and...oaf.*

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Her brain had reestablished contact with most of her body by the time she reached town. In the middle of the week, local activity was confined to the diner, the laundry and, of course, the bar. She parked on the street, got out of the car and slung the backpack onto her back.

When she dressed for the adventure, she had pawed through her closet and dresser, looking for something that said "stealthy." The image of a black clad cat burglar, lithe and unidentifiable, came to mind. Black, however, wasn't a key component of her wardrobe. And a sleek, androgynous look better suited willowy Jane. Darcy had too much going on up front and in the hips to pull off boyish.

She ended up wearing jeans, running shoes, and a navy blue T-shirt with the word "Meh" printed on the front. Her hair was pulled back into a pony tail and she wore a striped gray and blue hat with a short brim.

Sean was at the laundry. He had a washer and dryer at his house, but the dryer had a lousy work ethic, taking vacations every other week, so he often ended up hauling wet laundry into town.

As she approached the laundry, she could see that Sean was folding shirts, while a skinny blond chattered enthusiastically at him. The girl looked like she was in her late teens or early twenties. She wore cut-off shorts, a tank top and flip-flops. She was model thin with no boobs.

A slight smile was on Sean's lips and he nodded politely from time to time. Darcy, however, knew him well enough to know that he was wishing he had something sharp to jab into his eardrums. When she entered the laundry and got near, the reason was clear. The girl was yammering about *Jersey Shore*, and Sean loathed reality TV.

Nevertheless, the girl was gorgeous, with honey-blond hair, big green-hazel eyes and put together from graceful, long limbs. The spike of jealousy Darcy expected didn't materialize and she noted that they looked cute together.

"Hey," she said to Sean, with a genuine smile at the girl too. "No more soggy undies?"

"Huzzah, electricity," he replied.

"You could just buy a new dryer."

He grinned. "Then what would I complain about? To whine is human." He turned to the girl. "Molly, this is my friend, Darcy. Darcy, Molly."

"Hi." Molly extended her hand, giving Darcy a real handshake, not the usual stupid finger-shake favored by girly-girl types. Darcy decided she really couldn't hate her.

Once they left the laundry, walking toward his truck, Darcy said in an offhand manner, "She's cute."

"She's a child," Sean said. "And all she ever talks about are desperate degenerates glomming onto their fifteen minutes of fame."

Darcy smirked, pleased by his comment, even if she wasn't outright jealous. She really liked Sean as a friend and her body still wanted him with nothing on but the radio. Loki, however, having been unable to conquer the planet, had managed to occupy a huge chunk of geography in her heart. She didn't quite know what to do about that, since she had no idea how he felt. Probably he tolerated her because Thor would turn him into meat sauce if he did anything truly Loki-ish.

Sean loaded his dry laundry into his truck's front seat and they continued up the street. Edward's Heating and Cooling was two blocks off Route 8, and southwest of the laundry.

Sean walked close at her side, but didn't make an attempt to take her hand, which was okay, because she had the vague feeling she was cheating on somebody, although she wasn't sure who. A couple of furtive smooches, in the front seat of her car and in the kitchen, didn't exactly make for

happily ever after, forsaking all others, commitment, blah-blah-blah. Loki didn't seem particularly bothered by her relationship with Sean. But Sean...well, he probably would be less than enthused about her playing tonsil hockey with the man he called a "killer." Unconsciously, she remembered the heat of Loki's lips on hers and knew it was a game she wouldn't mind playing again.

Confused guilt made her stomach start to fold itself like origami and she was grateful when Sean spoke. "So do we have a plan or are we just winging it?"

Darcy made a swooping motion with her hand. "Like a drunken falcon." They passed the title loans shop and two vacant properties with signs in the window that read, "This space for lease." They turned right at the next corner and Darcy stopped to pull the detector from her backpack.

"That thing can really sense magic?" Sean eyed the device dubiously.

"And cause cancer in three out of five lab rats." Loki and Jane used a lead detector because it contained a tiny bit of Cadmium 109 isotope. "Let's see if it picks anything up on a random sample." She switched it on and pointed the business end an inch from a nearby window sill. When she squeezed the trigger, it made no sound, but "Null" popped up on its little screen. Tries on a nearby doorway, the sidewalk and side of the building yielded the same result.

"House of Yarn," said Sean, pointing at the sign in the window. "Probably not a hot spot for evil wizards."

Edwards Heating and Cooling was another block over, in what some might call the seedier side of Puente Antiguo. That meant it had some of the modern amenities of the newer part of town, like sidewalks, but the only streetlight on the block was dead, and opportunistic weeds sprouted from cracks in the sidewalk. On a few of the buildings, graffiti marred the facades like ugly tattoos.

Darcy didn't feel particularly nervous about the area, though. Gang activity in Puente Antiguo consisted of two pimply faced posers who dropped spray-painted scribbles on buildings when they weren't hanging out in their basement, playing non-stop Halo.

The repair shop shared a yellow brick building with Beto's Tires and Transmissions. Beto's had the larger chunk of the building, and a chain link-enclosed lot to the north. The lot was filled with tires, most of which looked used, stacked in towering black piles that reached to the height of the fence, which was topped with razor wire. Darcy eyed the wire, wondering who would want to steal old tires.

Edwards's place, in the southern half, only had a small lot in the back of the building. The business sign, made from a cheap plastic placard with black stick-on letters, was propped in the front window.

"Lights are off," observed Sean, but they stopped several feet from the window, both remembering their last experience with the flawed assumption that "no lights" meant "nobody home." Darcy handed Sean the detector, which he took gingerly, still wary of the device, and she pulled a flashlight from the backpack.

With a deep breath, she marched over to the window and shined the flashlight through the glass. The light revealed a small, grubby office. A dark green, metal desk dominated the space; a phone and random office stuff--piles of paper, pens, stapler--took up its top, along with nuts, bolts and a small section of silver ducting. There was a map of Northern New Mexico stuck on the wall with push pins, along with a business license and a poster of a motorcycle. No sign of a computer or other modern office equipment. A narrow hallway opened in the rear of the room, but the flashlight's beam didn't penetrate far down the corridor. Taking the detector from Sean, she tried

the window sill and got a null response. Same with the door.

Sean wasn't paying much attention, instead standing with his back to the building watching the street. Knowing it was pointless, she wrapped her hand around the doorknob and gave it a twist. It budged just a bit, stuck and then jerked and turned the rest of the way.

The door latch slid back with a loud click. "Wow," said Darcy.

"What are you doing?" Sean said, his voice a low hiss.

"It's a not-Christmas miracle." With a huge smile, she lifted her shoulders in shrug of exaggerated innocence. Turning back to the door, she set a finger on its surface and pushed. "Unlocked."

Sean did a face palm, then looked up the dark street nervously, blue eyes wide. "Somebody's going to call the cops on us."

"Nah. We're too white." She hefted the magic detector and poked her face through the opening. "Hullo. Lead inspectors, here."

"I'm pretty sure getting arrested for breaking and entering isn't on my bucket list," grumbled Sean, but he followed her into the building, closing the door behind them.

Darcy made for the desk, where she sampled several spots. All came back null, except for the section of ducting. Curiously, it started to beep a positive, the sound abruptly squelched off and then the display read null.

"What's that mean?" asked Sean.

"It's confused?" answered Darcy. She tried the desk chair and got the same yes/no answer. Different places on the floor in the vicinity all resulted in negatives. Setting the detector on the desk, she sat down and started to rifle through the drawers.

Sean crossed his arms over his chest. "Rumor has it, I'm pretty," he said. Darcy panned the flashlight at his face in time to see him wince at the description. "I'll have a lot of boyfriends in jail."

"Relax. The only two cops in the town are probably at the bar with Edwards and King." She went back to snooping. The top drawer contained two packs of cigarettes and a lighter. The larger of the side drawers contained files with handwritten labels. The smaller above it held old-fashioned receipt books. For a mechanical genius, Peter Edwards was very low-tech. She pawed through the larger drawer, until she found a file labeled "sheild."

She opened it on the desk for Sean to see. "That's the standard contract for services," said Sean, regarding the thick stapled sheaf of papers in the front of the folder. The contract had been signed by Sean's boss, Janet Behum, and Phil Coulson. At the second name, Darcy felt a sad pang in her heart, noting that there was no actual mention of SHIELD on the lengthy contract. Which made sense, since even her paychecks originated from a shadow corporation.

"He shouldn't have this stuff, here, in an unsecured location," said Sean. The remainder of the file contained as-built and architectural drawings, electrical and HVAC layouts, and other schematics of the SHIELD facility.

"Yikes." Darcy pointed at one drawing and looked up at Sean. She didn't have any experience reading construction drawings, but what she saw looked like the Fish Bowl. Someone had circled and X-ed over it with a thick red marker.

Sean's eyes widened. "They are obsessed." He gestured at the file. "You should take that and pass it on to Fury."

Darcy agreed, closing the folder. Before she slid it into her backpack, she ran the detector over it, getting a positive beep from the device.

She checked the rest of the room, netting negative readings except by the hallway, which gave off a distinct positive beep. The flashlight lit the hall, revealing two doors on the left. The first opened to a bathroom that smelled of pee. Assuming it was probably scarier than Jane and Thor's bathroom, she moved on. The second opened to a messy workroom. Three tall metal tool chests stood on the right side of the room. A long worktable took up most of the floor space and it was covered in mechanical bits and bobs. A stack of cardboard boxes, many with FedEx and UPS labels, teetered in a corner. Several wires, connected to something behind or under the pile of boxes, ran up the wall and disappeared in the ceiling. Most of the floor on the left was covered with HVAC units, ducting and other stuff Darcy couldn't identify.

She moved around the room, testing everything. The pile of boxes was negative, but a few spots on the toolboxes went yes/no. Nothing on the table registered a positive.

Staring at the pile of stuff on the floor, she said, "I wouldn't know a freeze ray gun if I saw one."

"Me neither. I'm still not sure that thing in your hand isn't a Star Trek prop," Sean said with a laugh. "Anyway, I think the only conclusion we can take from this adventure is that there might be traces of magic in the building, right?" Darcy nodded. "But that still doesn't mean they're connected to the murders."

"This thing only picks up magic that matches the hoodoo on the front porch."

Sean leaned against the table. "But we've only gotten two definitive hits."

"Let's try the back lot," she suggested, circling the table one last time. A little flashing red light, blinking from the darkness under a tool chest, caught her eye. Stopping, she crouched and pointed the flashlight at it.

"Ow," muttered Sean, who, deprived of light, had crashed into something.

"What's that? A burglar alarm?"

"Probably," said Sean gloomily, now crouched at her side and rubbing his shin. "And my jailhouse boyfriend's name will be Scar, or maybe T-Bone."

Darcy shot him a grin. "Would you like some cheese with your whine?" She reached under the chest and grabbed the blinking thing. A dark plastic box, along with several dust bunnies, came partway out, before it was stopped by wires. The same kind of wires that ran up the wall.

"Holy shit," said Sean.

"It's a clock, I mean a timer." Then she got why Sean had turned white as a ghost. "And it says 18, 17...16 seconds."

She was already rising as Sean's hand closed on her upper arm and hauled her up faster. Focusing the flashlight ahead of them, she ran toward the front door, Sean right behind her. For a split second, she stared stupidly at the door, both hands occupied with the detector and the flashlight. Sean reached around her and opened the door. He grabbed her arm again and towed her through the doorway.

"Run," he said, unnecessarily.

There was no traffic, which was a good thing, since neither bothered to look both ways, instead bolting into the street. They were almost across the street when the first blast hit.

"Get down!" Sean pushed her hard, with more strength than his lanky form suggested. Falling forward, she put out her hands, dropping the flashlight and detector. Sean's weight fell on her back and he said something unintelligible.

The sound wave fell like a blow on her ears. She shrank farther down, forehead on the rough asphalt, hands clamped to her ears. A second blast hit in quick succession and she had the sensation that all the air had vanished around her. Sounds, scents and colors vanished. Eyes closed tight, she cowered under Sean, feeling like the world was tearing itself apart.

When she got the courage, she opened her eyes, seeing a blur of something whizzing by out of the corner of her eyes. The chemical stench of petrol and motor oil rose from the asphalt.

Sean's arm went around her waist and he pulled her up. He said something, but her ears were roaring. He started to repeat himself, but instead scooped the magic detector and flashlight up and pushed her across the street and toward another side street. Together they half jogged, half walked away from the disaster.

After a block, she stopped in front of Lively Locks Beauty Parlor and looked back. At this angle she could see more of Beto's tire shop than Edward's place. Flames were starting to lick blazing tongues out the windows. She caught the first whiff of acrid smoke. One of the tire towers was also on fire. Something popped and sent a fiery orange plume into the black sky. In the distance, sirens started to wail. Or maybe they weren't so distant, as red lights started to strobe the street.

Sean urged her on, yelling in her ear, which sounded like a whisper. "We've got to get out here. Now."

They continued on for five blocks and then turned back to the main street. Flashing red lights splayed along the asphalt, sidewalk and over the buildings as two sheriff's cars zipped by, the sirens growing louder as her hearing recovered.

By the time they reached her little blue Honda, most of her hearing was back, accompanied by a constant ringing though. Sean turned her around and put the detector and flashlight in her backpack.

She slumped against the hood of her car, nose wrinkled at the stench of burning tires. "What the hell was that?"

"Redneck security?" he said, wearily, dark half circles under his eyes.

"That's crazy! Who uses explosives for security?" Her voice was taking on a high pitch. "What's the point of blowing up your own stuff? What! The! Fuck!" She hadn't felt this near hysteria since the night Thor fell out of the sky like a meteor. At least, then she got to Tase somebody. That's what she needed right now. If she could just Tase someone, she'd feel so much better.

Sean's attention was on the conflagration a few blocks away. His hair was extra scruffy from the shockwave and his jeans splotched with dark stains around the knees from the oily asphalt. The half circles under his eyes stood out like bruises on his fair skin.

With a feeble smile, she said, "Can I show a guy a good time or what?"

He faced her and smiled crookedly. "Well, you're never dull." A weird skinny shadow ran down

the side his face. Literally ran.

"Oh, shit, you're bleeding!"

Lifting his hand, he touched his face, fingertips coming away crimson. Darcy slipped the backpack off and dug around. The backpack was Jane's and some of her wet hand wipes were still in the side pocket. Darcy tore open the little package and started to clean the blood from his face. The cut was on his scalp, about an inch above his hairline.

Cleaning was futile since he kept bleeding. She unwrapped a clean wipe, folded it and pushed it gently against the cut. He got the hint and took over, pressing it hard on the wound. "I'm okay," he assured her. "We should both get home before SHIELD gets wind of this and spots us in the vicinity."

Darcy grimaced, realizing that there was an excellent chance that SHIELD, or at least Fury, might make a connection. But better to deal with the fallout tomorrow, than tonight. She said bye to Sean and drove home.

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Warm yellow light glowed through the front window although the rest of the house was dark. The backpack in her left hand, Darcy tromped up the stairs and let herself in the house.

Loki sat at his usual place on the couch, dressed in a dark green shirt, black pants and simple boots. His legs were stretched out, feet on the coffee table. A glass of red wine in one hand, he read a science journal.

Darcy dropped the backpack by the door and leaned against the wall, feeling sort of exhilarated and shocked all at once.

He cast her a look that she was starting to recognize as feigned indifference, but something in her demeanor made his eyebrows lift slightly. "Something amiss?"

"Things were done. Mistakes made. Stuff blew up."

"Blew up?" Loki set the wine glass and journal on the coffee table and rose, the beginning of menace emanating from his tall frame.

She considered lying, but then remembered she was a terrible liar. Besides, there was a good chance Fury would unleash some of his namesake on her tomorrow. "Edward's shop. It kind of went...kablooey."

He started toward her at a normal pace, then catching sight of her bedraggled appearance, appeared before her in a swirl of green. "The shop exploded?"

"Like Chinese New Year. Only not so pretty and no cute dragon costumes."

His hands were on her face, green eyes meeting hers. "You smell of smoke. Are you hurt? How close were you to this explosion?"

"My ears are ringing like church bells."

A long string of angry words in a harsh language came from his mouth. "Thor!" he yelled.

"Watch your mouth," she quipped. "This is a PG-rated living room."

Ignoring her, he said again, "Thor," this time accentuating the name with magic that made the house shake. "Are you having any difficulties breathing?"

"No."

Snapping his fingers on either side of her head, he continued his interrogation. "Besides ringing, can you hear, from both ears?"

"Yeah. Why?"

A second later, Thor emerged from the bedroom, followed by a dazed Jane. Thor, however, was wide awake and holding Mjölnir and obviously in battle mode. "What's wrong?"

"There was an explosion of some sort. Darcy was near." Loki looked at his brother, his angular jaw set in an angry clench. He looked at Darcy and back at Thor. "You have a talent for determining the severity of injuries." The admission obviously annoyed him. "She appears uninjured but..."

Thor nodded, understanding. He set Mjölnir aside and gestured at the couch. When Darcy sat, he bent down and lifted her face in his big, warm hands and met her eyes. Next he moved his hands to her upper shoulders, which she recalled was the same thing he did after she'd tripped over the dead body on the porch. This time a warm, sparky energy originated from his hands and she tasted something like peppermint, but sharper. It occurred to her that, like her nightmares, this was another side effect of Loki letting her sense the magic.

Loki's green eyes were on his brother, face set in a hard resentful lines, hands clenched in tight fists.

Thor took her hands, his powerful fingers started to close around her hers, but he paused. "This is blood. You *are* injured."

"I'm not. It's Sean's." She sighed. While Thor's concern was sweet, she felt sort of weird about holding hands with Jane's boyfriend. And Loki was looking grimmer every second. "I have all my fingers and toes. Why the fuss?"

"Blast injury," answered Jane. She was sitting on the loveseat, looking worried, toying with a lock of brown hair. "Shock waves can damage internal organs..." Seeing Jane's anxious expression, Darcy felt an emotion start to grow in her belly.

"She seems unharmed," said Thor, straightening. "Besides the reek of the foulest smoke I've ever smelled." He grinned down at Darcy.

"Burnt rubber. I hope nobody needs tires tonight," said Darcy.

Jane put her face in her hands, a huge sigh moving over her slim frame. "What happened?" she asked, face still hidden. Thor sat beside her and rubbed a hand over her back.

Darcy started to tell her story, but only got as far as opening the door and going into Edward's shop.

"Wait," said Loki, expression stony. "You went in the building?"

She tried the smile and shrug thing. "Like I said, the front door was unlocked. I, uh, thought we should check. Make sure nothing had been stolen."

Loki did a face palm that mirrored Sean's earlier version of the gesture. Thor just looked...thunderous. Literally.



"And the building exploded soon thereafter," Thor concluded, leaning forward, blue eyes angry.

"About ten minutes, after," answered Darcy. "But that's not the interesting part. Well, okay, explosions are always interesting..." Thor was doing a fabulous impression of Loki and ignoring her.

He stood and took two long steps toward Loki. "This is your fault, brother." Anger vibrated from his powerful frame.

"I'm not your brother," snapped Loki. "And how is it my fault?"

"You encouraged her-"

"She has a mind of her own."

"She is a mortal. She doesn't always act in her best interests. We know better."

"Hey," grumbled Darcy. "Taking my 'Dad' jokes a little too literally, big guy."

"And I thought freedom was a guiding principle in your dealings with mortals," said Loki to Thor. "The choice to run about killing each other and getting themselves killed."

"Well, yes...no..." Mjölnir was back in Thor's hands and he advanced on Loki, who didn't move. "You twist my words!"

Loki's lip curled. "They arrive already twisted, the product of a pathetic, distorted mind." He took a step forward and the two faced off, no more than a couple feet between them, bristling with rage.

Loki leaned ever so slightly into Thor's space, a suggestion of crimson in his eyes, the hint of something alien moving under his skin. With icy calm words that belied his demeanor, he said, "Though who better to level a charge of rashness at Darcy? You, who have blundered stupidly into one misadventure after another, headless of the consequences."

"The same stupidity that drove me to rescue you from prison on Asgard," countered Thor, matching Loki's posture.

"I did not ask for your rescue! I didn't want it!"

"Oh, hell," said Jane. Darcy's take was similar, but included several more expletives. As things stood, in a contest between the two, she had no doubt who the winner would be, and his name wasn't Loki. However conflicted her feelings toward her former-sociopath-turned-kind-of-amusing-and-huggable roommate, she didn't want to scrub his blood off the walls. Provided there were any walls left to clean. Provided there was any Darcy or Jane left after the two testosterone-poisoned immortals tried to kill each other.

Casting about, she looked for something useful, although she didn't know what. There was the journal, glass of wine, and a pen on the coffee table. Her fingers clenched the couch's material and her eyes lit on one of the smaller, and appropriately named throw pillows.

"Hello!" She flung the pillow at Loki, which he batted away at the last moment before it smacked him in the face. "Collateral damage, here." She pointed at herself and Jane. Loki turned his fiery glare on her, and she shrank back a little before she could stop herself. His eye color really had shifted into the redder part of the spectrum.

Thor also turned, attention on Jane. Anger still burning in his eyes, his shoulders rose with a deep

inhalation. With a dark glance at Loki, he took two large steps backward. "I will not fight you, brother."

"I am not your brother."

As Darcy stared at the two enraged men, emotion welled up and she knew its name: guilt. *I did this*. She sniffed, noting that she smelled like a tire crematorium. "I'm sorry." Genuinely contrite, she got up and slunk away to the bathroom, feeling the prickle of everyone's stares on her back.

Because she did reek, she took a long hot shower. The house was dark, quiet, and still standing when she left the bathroom. Her hair was damp, so she covered the pillow with a towel, and then curled up in her bed. Loki's rose was still sprightly, although one petal had dropped off.

Guilt hooked up with shame and she bit back a snuffle. In one night, she'd almost gotten Sean killed and pushed Loki and Thor, who'd been civil to one another lately, to battle. The rose got more glittery in the weak moonlight as tears crystallized in her eyes. She might have spent hours torturing herself with self-recrimination, but the after-adrenaline-rush crash set in and she drifted to sleep.

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The dream tried to get through again, the sounds of fighting, the rasp of rough rope and fear snaking across her subconscious. The hands latched onto her shoulders and this time she was all Darcy, punching with her fists, determined not to surrender. Her dream self's resistance did manage to keep anything awful from happening, but she was still utterly helpless, trapped by unnaturally strong hands. She struggled on, fear giving way to pure, unadulterated anger.

"Darcy!"

"No!" The grip on her felt so horribly real.

"Dar-cy." The voice pronounced the two syllables of her name slowly. "Wake up." The hands released her shoulders, only to take her wrists and pin them to the bed. The bed...her bed...in the house on Don Tenorio Road. A mild damp smell suffused with the scent of strawberry shampoo wafted over her.

Sleep fell away and she opened her eyes to a dark silhouette over her, ghostly face framed by black hair. "L-Loki?"

He was sitting on the edge of the bed, at an angle so he could hold her wrists. "I'm going to release your arms. I trust you won't hit me again." He let go and sat up.

"Like *I* could hurt you."

She saw a flash of white teeth. "No, but even the tiniest gnat can be annoying."

She rubbed a hand over her eyes. "Another bug comparison. When do I move up the evolutionary ladder?"

"A mammal, perhaps? *Rattus novegicus*?"

"That's a rat, isn't it?" She sat up and touched her hair, finding it dry. "Did you *ever* get any action in Asgard? Your version of sweet talk sucks."

He didn't have an immediate rejoinder and the guilt and shame from earlier started to rise in her

chest. She leaned forward and clunked her forehead against his shoulder. "I'm sorry. That was mean, wasn't it?"

"Don't touch me," he said with obvious humor in his voice. After a beat he spoke again. "Are you offended?"

"No. You're just being...Loki."

"And you were just being Darcy."

Maybe it was all that had happened that night, or maybe it was some kind of stupid hormonal thing, but his statement made her go very still inside, frozen by an emotion too complex to name. It made her feel so absurdly happy that it broke her heart. She bent her legs at the knee, shifting position so she could lean her face and right shoulder against his back.

"I'm sorry I made you and Thor fight."

"That's a fair bit of hubris."

"Huh?"

"There isn't much that doesn't set Thor and I at each other's throats." She felt his sigh. "Although, you may have the distinction of being one of the few that have kept us from beating each other bloody."

They sat together in silence in the darkness, Darcy breathing in the scent of him and listening to the rhythm of his heartbeat.

"Even in the most foolish of statements, there is sometimes wisdom," he said after a while.

"Speak English, magic boy."

"Thor had a point," he said and she could almost picture his lean face growing tight with the concession. "Had you been injured or...worse, I would have carried some of the blame."

"Nuh-uh. I am kind of like Thor, marching into stupid because I want to be the hero."

"You are not like Thor," he said, hotly. "You are young, terribly young, and braver than you should be."

"Sounds like a fancy way of saying 'stupid,'" she observed with a touch of self pity.

"Well, youth and idiocy are often coincident."

Making a fist with her left hand, she punched him lightly in the back. "You're not supposed to agree with me, you big dummy."

His shoulders shook with a quiet laugh. "Do any pillows remain that don't reek of strawberry shampoo?"

She sat up and moved her gaze over the familiar straight lines of his profile. "You could just sleep in the bed. I don't bite. Much."

He looked at her from the corner of his eye, the sharp edges dropping from his expression, leaving him looking startlingly young. "I don't think that would be wise."

"Why? Because I might jump your bones?"

She watched the play of muscles in his face as he figured out the idiom. "Or the reverse," he admitted.

The blood left her brain as her heart took up an erratic beat. She waved a hand in front of her face. "I'm blind," she said. "I don't see the problem."

His gaze move away from her, and he stared across the room to the closet as if he could find some useful truth there. The wheels turned in her head and her eyes narrowed with realization.

"What did Jane and Thor say to you?"

The softness fled his face, chased off by implacable and coldly mocking. "They said you deserved better." His mouth compressed in a hard sardonic line. "And I told them that their concerns were needless as you were quick to note that the kiss was nothing more than a bit of fun, aided by alcohol, and carrying no significance whatsoever."

His tone would suggest that even the conversation was ludicrous, that he found the very idea of romance ridiculous, the kind of stupid idea that only came from his oaf of a brother's head.

But she found it emotionally wrenching nonetheless; not for her, but for him.

She wriggled free of the covers and moved to him. Pressing her chest to his back, she wrapped her arms around him, her legs, folded at the knee, on either side of him.

"Don't," he said, this time with an angry edge. She tightened her grip, lacing her fingers together and leaned her face against the back of his neck. "Don't." He repeated himself, but this time it was a plea. "Darcy, don't. Please." His hands claws briefly at hers, trying to free himself from her embrace. She hung on with grim determination. He had none of Thor's bulging musculature, but the form she clung to was solid and thoroughly male.

He shuddered, long and agonized as if all the heat had fled his body. The resistance left him in a sigh and he leaned his weight back against her, defeated.

"Loki." She said his name because if he was Silvertongue, then she was Leadtongue. If the moment called for anything other than a wisecrack, she was mute. She lifted her face and the ragged ends of his poorly cut hair tickled the tip of her nose. The heat of his body bled into her inner thighs, but she tried to push back her need, and just be, wrapped in his presence, alive and warm and not alone.

Her window was closed, but she could still hear the growly buzz of a motorcycle moving along the road. A little later there was a quick flash of white from car lights. At this hour, probably the SHIELD patrol.

She felt the warmth of his hands on hers and his fingers working to disengage her grip. His touch was gentle and she didn't resist. He rose and stood, head bowed, staring at the floor.

"Really?" she said with open disappointment.

"Really." He reached his hand to her face, lifting her chin with slim fingertips. She closed her eyes as his thumb ran over her lips. His touch vanished and when she opened her eyes, he was backing away, a pillow in his hand.

"I need, we need...more time," he said, sort of awkwardly.

She didn't know exactly what he meant, but she quirked her eyebrows at him and said, "You've got all the time in the world, you're immortal. Me..."

For a second, he looked startled, as if the idea had never occurred to him. Then he folded his long legs and laid down, back to her. She blew a long breath and then peeled the damp towel off her pillow and slid back under the covers, her eyes on him.

To her surprise, he flipped around, eyes black in the darkness and focused on her. "Would you do me a favor and wake me in the morning?"

"You're bitey in the morning."

His teeth flashed, impish. "I won't hurt you, I promise."

"K," she said.

She wasn't sure who fell asleep first, but they did so with their eyes on each other.

## Chapter 14

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It was a damned good thing Darcy's nightmares didn't strike in the morning, because her immortal protector would probably sleep right through the attack.

Loki was stretched in a long-limbed sprawl on her floor. Utterly at peace, his face was almost angelic. A spray of black hair fell over his forehead. Darcy was pretty sure if she took his picture and uploaded it, the Internet would explode. But she had enough explosions to her credit for the week.

She went for a bike ride instead and then took a shower and got dressed. Next, she knocked on Thor and Jane's door. When a bleary-eyed, and somewhat worried looking Jane opened the door, she said, "Tell Thor he's off the hook. I'll wake sleeping beauty." Thor was more than happy to turn the task over to her.

*Time to wake the supervillain.* She sat at his side, knees bent and legs out to the side. "Rise and shine, sunshine!" she said. Not brave enough to touch him, she clapped her hands in front of his face. His eyelids may have twitched. Maybe.

Timidly, she put a hand on his upper arm and withdrew it. Finding all her fingers intact, she tried again, this time tightening her grip and giving him a light shake. Nothing. She clapped again. No reaction. Apparently evil always happened at midnight because it wasn't a morning person.

"Come on, Mad Science. I want my breakfast. Wake up." Feeling braver, she grabbed his chin and turned his head back and forth. She slid her fingers up and squeezed his cheeks, moving his lips and making funny faces. Still nothing.

She straightened and glared down at him. "I've taken my shirt off. Boobies!" No response.

*What am I thinking.* "Look! Over there. It's the Tesseract. All yours!" Other than the slow rise and fall of his chest, he was utterly motionless.

She heard a chuckle behind her and turned to find Thor standing in the doorway. "No luck?"

"What's your trick?" she asked.

"I grasp him by the shoulders, lift and give him a hard shake. Repeatedly."

Darcy laughed. "No wonder he's nuts. You've rattled his brains too many times." She picked up Loki's limp arm, took his hand and waved it at Thor. "'Hi, Thor, it's me, Loki. If I don't wake up, Darcy's going to paint my fingernails pink and put makeup on me.'"

Laughing, Thor continued down the hallway toward the kitchen.

*Hmmm.* "You're at my mercy, aren't you?" Twisting his arm around, she smacked his hand lightly against his cheek. "Stop hitting yourself." Smack. "Stop, stop." Smack, smack.

His hand clenched in a fist and his arm stiffened, immobile. "Enough," he muttered sleepily, eyes still closed.

"Wakey, wakey. The world's not going to conquer itself."

"I'm awake."

"No, you're not. Your eyes are still closed. You're still horizontal."

He glared balefully at her through slitted eyes.

"An ancient evil awakes," she said in movie trailer announcer voice. His eyes slid shut. "And goes back to sleep. This movie plot sucks. Get up." Trying Thor's trick, she grabbed his shoulders. Lifting was out of the question, so she just shook, more than a little distracted by the lean muscle in her grasp. "If you don't wake up, I'll kiss you again. Mortal cooties, yuck." Two slivers of green appeared and she thought, sadly, *Sure*, that *does it*.

Strong hands grabbed her upper arms and yanked her down. She stared into his half open eyes, inches away from hers, heart rate spiking in his proximity. "You should not make empty threats," he said.

"Who, says it's empty?" Because he'd been kind of a prude last night, she bent and gave him a chaste peck on the cheek.

"Blasted woman, if you're going to torment me, at least do it right." His hands were suddenly on both sides of her face and he pulled her mouth to his. A shiver ran through her at the divine relief of his lips taking hers, but unlike before, she didn't freeze up. Weight braced on her elbows, she let out a little whimper as he lazily bit her lower lip and swiped his tongue over hers. Feeling his smug smirk against her mouth, she lowered her body to his, breasts pressed suggestively against his chest. Beneath her, she felt his breath catch and it was her turn to smirk.

This time, they both seemed much more comfortable with the idea of kissing. He moved his hands to her back, rubbing a long easy line from her shoulder blades, down her spine and stopping at her waist, fingers tantalizingly just beneath her pants' waistband. His body heat radiated deliciously through his shirt to her breasts and her nipples hardened in response. The kiss moved at a languid pace, their approach tempered by the fact that they lay in plain sight on her bedroom floor and that Loki was, quiet frankly, rather groggy. Mornings obviously weren't his friend.

Which made it all the more fun, since there was no question she was in control. She could pull back and tease his lips with hers, brief brushes of contact, and longer contact, then back away and begin again. "You awake, yet?" she said into his mouth on one such retreat.

Eyes still half closed, he sat up, bringing her with him. With a last brief kiss, he let her go and turned away, dragging his fingers through his hair. "In part," he said. Giving him a quick once over, Darcy determined that he didn't mean his brain.

She flashed him a self-satisfied leer, dizzy from the kiss. "Is that why you wanted me to wake you?"

"Actually," he said, attention on the door, "The notion of not being shaken like...a martini had a tremendous appeal." He favored her with a sleepy smirk. "I can't quibble with your approach, though."

"007. Another Midgard reference. All that reading has paid off."

"I'm a veritable font of useless mortal trivia."

"Is that the new plan? Conquer us ants through pop culture?" He shot her a sly look and she groaned. "Oh no, you're scheming again."

"You assume I ever stopped."

"No," said Darcy. "No more blowing things up, or aliens, or evil monologues."

"Why would I pursue a strategy that so clearly doesn't work?" He cocked his head at her. "As for blowing things up, you seem to be my successor in that matter."

"A girl's gotta have a hobby."

From the kitchen came the very distant *ka-chunk* of the toaster; Thor getting his recommended daily allowance of preservatives and sugar via Pop-Tarts. "How did that happen, precisely?" asked Loki, meaning the explosion.

Darcy gave him the quick rundown, almost disappointed that it really wasn't her that blew anything up.

Loki was sitting, legs stretched before him, leaned slightly back, weight rested on his hands, eyes on the door. Darcy shifted, mirroring his posture, facing her bedroom window. She wiggled her toes, trying to work out the remnants of lust that still coursed through her system from the kiss.

After a moment, he asked, "Did the device have any switches on it?"

"One. It didn't seem like a good idea to see what it did."

"No, that wouldn't have been wise. My guess is the device had a delay to allow either man time to turn it off. Since both men scorn sobriety, they may have required the full ten minutes to remember the detonator."

He leaned forward, folding his legs and leaning his arms over his knees. Darcy took opportunity to study the long curving line of his back. "You were across the street when the explosives went off?" he asked.

"Not quite."

He studied her, green eyes moving over her from head to toe. "It's astonishing that you weren't seriously hurt and the boy had only a scratch." He bent his head slightly, holding her gaze with his. "You can't go out on you own again."

That sounded too much like an order for Darcy's taste, but she decided she could make it work in her favor. "Does this mean you'll come with next time?"

"It means," he said, combing fingers through unruly black hair, "That I need to remember where I've encountered that magic."

"Maybe Thor should whack you in the head with Mjölnir." He gave her a wounded look and she shrugged. "Used to work when my old TV acted up. Only my fist, not a mythical hammer of the gods."

"You've now demoted me from lunatic to faulty television." He grinned sardonically. "Is that *your* version of 'sweet talk'?"

"Yeah. Is it working?"

"Regrettably, yes." He rose unsteadily, lanky frame swaying. "How far the mighty have fallen, indeed."



Mouth open, ready to launch a retort, she stopped, eyes on the space under her dresser, the perfect place to hide a bug. "Wow. Did we just give SHIELD another naughty ear worm?"

"No. I disabled all the devices in the house last night and I always kill the ones in your room." With none of his usual grace, he shuffled off to his room. Darcy checked out his ass anyway.

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Thor and Jane were sitting at the table, coffee and respective breakfast foods in hand. Curiously, they weren't smooshed together, hip-to-hip like a couple of mismatched Siamese twins, and she detected a measure of tension between the two. In the background, on the TV, a car salesman yelled enthusiastically about the sale of the century, which curiously, also happened last week and the week before.

"Morning!" she said, pouring some chocolate-y coffee and reaching for her cereal.

"Good morning, Darcy," said Thor with his usual cheer. Jane's reply was much more guarded. Sighing in her head, Darcy put together her breakfast, sat down and started to eat. A minute later, Jane's stare was boring a hole in Darcy's head.

"Do I have a volcano-sized zit on my forehead?" she asked Jane, mildly.

Embarrassed, Jane looked away, darting a glance at Thor. "Sorry, my mind's somewhere else." Before Darcy could let loose a wisecrack, Jane smiled at Thor and said, "Could you do me a big favor? I left my blue notebook in the bedroom. Would you mind getting it, please?" Thor, Prince of Asgard, probably wasn't in the habit of fetching things for anyone, but he nodded agreeably, and stood, his Pop-Tarts nothing more than crumbs on the table.

Once he was out of earshot, Darcy wrapped her hands around the hot coffee mug and said, "*Find* something in your room? That's not a favor, that's a quest."

Jane smiled wanly. "Who better than Thor for the job?"

After taking a long sip of coffee, Darcy leaned back in her chair, appraising Jane. "So what's the real reason you sent the big lug away?"

Jane cast a quick look at the hallway. "I saw you kissing Loki. On your floor, just now."

"Kissing?" said Darcy innocently. "That wasn't kissing, it was resuscitation. You know how he is in the mornings."

"I'm pretty sure CPR doesn't involve tongue."

Darcy arched her eyebrows. "My version does. It's really effective."

Jane's eyes narrowed. "I bet it is."

Making a big show of looking around the room, Darcy said, "Where's the Jane who said I could kiss anybody I wanted to?"

"She shows up when Fury starts throwing his weight around," replied Jane. "I meant what I said, but...*Loki*? Seriously? You know what he is, what he's done."

Lifting the coffee mug to her mouth, Darcy breathed in the comforting smell of chocolate, but didn't take a drink. Her immediate impulse, to continue making light of the kiss, died in her throat.

But she also couldn't bring herself to tell Jane that truth. That she wanted Loki naked, above her, under her, inside her. And yet she'd be content with him just on her floor, his presence making her room all the more like home. That she loved the way he talked to her about science and magic, like there was a snowball's chance in hell that she'd understand any of it; like he believed she was smart; like he knew her ditzzy flippancy was a kind of armor.

Like he respected her.

In the end, all she could say was, "He's my friend," which, frankly, was a big admission itself.

Those three words, however, may have disarmed Jane more than any bigger confession. Her pretty face shifted in confusion.

"And Thor?" said Darcy, "thinks his little bro could do better?"

"No." Jane blew out a frustrated sigh. "He thinks..." She set her elbows on the table and put her face in her hands. "I shouldn't tell you this. It'll just encourage you."

Darcy snorted. "Now you have to tell me."

Jane blurted out the rest in rapid fire of words. "He thinks you're good for Loki. His only concern is that you'll break his heart."

"Is that even possible?" The question was sort of rhetorical. Darcy suspected that Loki's heart came in a box with the words "Some assembly required" stamped in small text on the side. And when the box was opened, there'd be a million tiny pieces and instructions written in Chinese translated from Klingon. Darcy doubted there was much a mortal science assistant could do to a heart already so shattered.

Their conversation ended with the familiar cadence of Thor and Loki's voices. Basically, a cheerful bass alternating with an irritated growl. The two came into the kitchen soon after: Thor with broad smile on his face and blue notebook in hand, quest successful, and Loki, with his attention on the coffee maker as it were the Tesseract and every other artifact of power in the universe bound into one convenient glass pot.

"Coffee's your god, isn't it?" Darcy said when he sat down.

"More a master, the accursed brown swill," he said bitterly.

Out of the corner of her eyes, she could see Thor watching them with a fond smile. She wasn't sure if his approval was a good thing. Loki would probably lose what little interest he had in her if he thought the relationship made Thor happy.

On the television, video of Edwards Heating and Cooling and the tire shop burning popped up. "Fire investigators don't have a definite answer yet," said the on-the-spot reporter, "but they suspect it was caused by a gas leak."

"SHIELD's already gotten their tentacles into the matter," observed Loki. "I doubt any competent investigator would miss the evidence of a detonator and explosives."

Darcy's heart sank, any hope that she wouldn't get a scolding from Fury fading fast. To distract herself, she turned to a more practical matter. "Jane, did you pay the propane bill?" Jane's expression, unhappy realization, said it all. "Don't worry," Darcy said, "I'll pay it online when we get to work."

But boring stuff like the utility bills wasn't enough of a distraction from the creeping dread in her stomach. Even Loki must have noticed the strain on her face, because he was waiting for her on the porch. After she'd locked up, he stopped her, studied her with a critical eye and then hooked his thumbs under a section of hair on either side of her head. As he ran the hair through his fingers, she smelled familiar cinnamon.

"What did you do?" she said, following him to the SUV, but, of course, he didn't answer.

She climbed in the backseat and strapped on her seatbelt. "Thor, what did your not-brother do to my hair?" *Not orange, please don't be orange.*

Turning around, Thor looked her, head tilted to the side. "Noth-, oh," he smiled, "That's rather lovely, I think."

Straining against her seatbelt, Jane twisted to see. "Turn your head. Oh, that is neat. Dark streaks, but iridescent, purple toward the roots and then dark blue."

Pulling a section forward and moving it in the light, Darcy found that in addition to midnight blue, her new low-lights were tipped in dark green. "Bitchin!" To Loki, she said, "Thanks. How long will this last?" Her purple hair faded to brown after two weeks.

He already had his nose in a book, Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. "How long do you want it to last?"

"At least through Christmas."

"Done."

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A full two hours passed before Darcy was summoned to Director Fury's office and she was starting to believe that no one had made a connection between her and the destruction in town.

Remembering her conversation with Jane, she hopped on the Internet and paid the propane bill and, while she was at it, the cable bill, too.

The little gray lizard, conjured yesterday by Loki, trotted across her desk and onto the computer's keyboard. It stopped, bobbed up and down, and looked at her. Or at least, a part of her. "Loki, your pet is staring at my boobs!"

"Lo-ki." Thor's tone was scolding, but he was smiling. Any response from the god of mischief and lecherous lizards, however, was cut off by the chime of the Fish Bowl's door.

"Natasha!" Thor rose from his chair, looking surprised and more than a little hopeful. Jane had given him some paperwork to sort out, and obviously, he wasn't the man for that job. In fact, he was staring at the gorgeous, redheaded SHIELD agent like she was an angel come to deliver him from boredom with Avengers' business.

"Morning, Thor," she said, a twinkle in her eyes suggesting she knew exactly what he was thinking. She probably did; the woman had an uncanny ability to read people. "Jane. Darcy."

Loki, of course, ignored her, continuing to scroll through data on the computer. Beyond a dismissive glance his way, Natasha did the same.

Rather than tight black leather body armor, she wore a perfectly tailored dark blue pantsuit, the color bringing out the vivid copper of her hair. Her only obvious weapon was a gun at her hip. On

anyone else, the weapon might have created a ridiculously high fashion Annie Oakley vibe. But on Natasha, it worked.

Natasha turned to Darcy. "Director Fury sent me to escort you to his office."

Darcy scooted her chair backward, genuinely unnerved. "He sent you?" She liked Natasha, but the woman was scary. "Are you going to take me out back and shoot me?"

"The Director considered it," Natasha deadpanned, "but then he realized it's unnecessary, since you're going to get yourself killed on your own."

"Demolition Darcy, that's me."

"Why *did* he send you?" asked Thor.

"He thought I'd be less threatening than a guard." There was a wry smile on her mouth.

"For a smart guy, he doesn't always read people that well, does he?" said Darcy.

The smile moved to her eyes. "And," she said with a shrug, "I'm in town."

"Really? For how long?" Darcy's mind pounced on a brilliant idea.

Natasha paused. "Through Friday." There was a question in her eyes, but Darcy decided to leave the issue till later.

"Okay," Darcy said, picking up the folder taken from Edwards's shop and standing. "Off to the principal's office."

As they started out of the Fish Bowl, Natasha's gaze moved downward, catching sight of the little reptile on the nearby table. "Why's there a lizard in the lab?"

"Mad Science made it," replied Darcy.

Natasha lifted an eyebrow, appraising the creature. "It's staring at my breasts."

"Yeah," said Darcy, "It's like the GEICO gecko's pervy little brother."

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Director Fury's office was accessed through a smaller front office, guarded by his secretary Cora Chen. At about five feet two inches, Cora didn't seem imposing, but her slim athletic build hinted at untold lethal skills under the white blouse and black pencil skirt. She nodded politely at Natasha and Darcy, but didn't bother with other pleasantries, continuing whatever she was doing on the computer.

The front office was decorated in muted southwestern shades of tan and brown. Two prints of Ansel Adams photos hung on the wall, and Cora sat behind a simple wood desk. Fury's office had more of the traditional masculine power decor, with dark wood wainscoting, leather chairs and a carved oak desk for the Director himself. Two prints in expensive frames, Winslow Homer's "The Gulf Stream" and "Fox Hunt," hung on the left and right wall. The only things on his desk were a laptop computer and a phone. No other doors led out of the room, but Darcy figured he must have had some secret way out. Maybe the desk folded back to reveal a secret passage to an even more secret jet.

Sean was already seated in a chair before Fury's desk. When he looked up, she saw he still had half

circles under his eyes and the white in his left was spotted with broken blood vessels. He smiled warmly, but Darcy felt a hard sharp stab of guilt. The Director, seated in his plush leather chair, leaned back, watching her as she entered the office. Natasha shut the door behind them and station herself by the right wall.

Like every other office in the building, it was cold. Darcy rubbed her arms as she sat down and said, "Hi," to Sean. Fury said nothing, attention on Darcy. "You know," she said, to hide her nerves, "Loki fixed our AC. No more arctic temps." The Director continued to stare at her.

Obviously they were playing the same silence game as before in the lab. Except, she didn't have Loki to back her up, just poor Sean who'd been dragged into this mess by her impulsivity. Her fingers itched to reach across the desk, pluck the strap that held Fury's eye patch and snap it back against his head. She broke quickly: "It wasn't our fault. It was booby trapped. And the door was unlocked. If they didn't want people in the building they should have locked their door. Wasn't our fault."

"Looks like we won't be needing torture, sir," said Natasha with a smirk.

"Torture is absolutely not necessarily." Darcy smiled broadly. "I'll tell you everything. ATM codes, Facebook password, name of the first boy I ever kissed." She frowned. "Well, except that I don't exactly remember. It was either Matthew Morales or Kevin Dietz." With a shrug, she added, "It was junior high and I was drunk."

Fury exchanged a look with Natasha and then leaned forward. "See that?" He pointed to a spot on his shiny brown head.

"Uh, no," said Darcy.

"Those are all the gray hairs I'd have if I wasn't bald. All caused by you."

"Hurray, extreme male pattern baldness," she said. At her side, Sean lifted a hand to his mouth, his shoulders switching.

Fury leaned back in his chair. "I always assumed the one giving me trouble would be your boy, Loki."

"He's not-

"Or Thor. Somebody with superpowers and a super ego. But no, it's the damn science assistant who goes and blows up the damn town."

"With all due respect, sir," said Sean, "While we shouldn't have been in the building, there was no way we could have foreseen what happened."

"It was just one building," protest Darcy.

"One building destroyed and several others, along with two cars, damaged. I should make you pay for the damage, take it out of your paycheck."

"Honestly?" said Darcy, "If it's that bad, I won't live or work long enough to pay it all off."

"At the rate you're going, that's an understatement," said Fury. "And you almost got Sean killed in the process."

"How was I supposed to know there was a bomb in the building?"

"Edwards was hired by an overeager contracts specialist who was trying to ingratiate SHIELD with the local community," explained Fury. "The problem is, if he'd done the necessary background checks, Edwards's history of mental illness, in particular PTSD, would have shown up and he never would have set foot on SHIELD property."

At this Darcy gave Fury an incredulous look. "And you told me this when?"

"It wasn't your concern."

"Uh-huh. Was too. You knew I was going to snoop around." She wrapped her arms around herself, feeling her teeth about to chatter. Somebody really needed to fix the AC.

"You know what you remind me of?" she said to Fury. "All the adults in the Harry Potter stories, who refused to tell Harry the truth because they thought ignorance protected him. Which it didn't.

"You could have said, 'Edwards is a nutjob who thinks it's okay to blow up a neighborhood to make a point.'" Everyone's attention was on her and she knew what they were thinking. "Okay," Darcy admitted, "I also live with that kind of guy. But that doesn't mean I can automatically detect crazy."

"She's right," said Natasha.

Fury didn't look convinced. "And would the truth have stopped you?"

"Maybe." She had acted rashly, but her stupidity might have been tempered if she knew Edwards wasn't just a drunk, but a permanent resident of Crazy Town. "Where are they? Edwards and King? Did you like, arrest them?"

Exchanging a quick glance with Natasha, Fury said, "King is dead. Edwards's whereabouts are unknown."

"Dead?" said Sean. "The same way as-?"

"No," replied Fury. "Looks like he was killed by a single bullet to the head. His body, what was left of it, was found in the yard behind Edwards Heating and Cooling." He fired a hard stare at Darcy, then Sean.

"Unless Tasers make bullet holes, it wasn't us. We never made it back to the yard." Darcy then went on to tell Fury what had happened that night.

"Perhaps Edwards and King had a falling out," said Natasha. "The bomb was a clumsy attempt to dispose of the body and cover Edward's tracks."

"We're surrounded by miles of barren desert and hungry coyotes. An explosion seems like overkill," said Sean. "There are probably easier ways to dispose of a body."

Remembering the folder, Darcy tossed it on Fury's desk. "That was in their office. It set off the magic detector and there's a drawing with the Fish Bowl circled in red, in there."

Fury paged through the folder, dark face going grimmer. "How the hell did they even get this stuff out of the building?" He handed it to Natasha, who studied the contents, her face inscrutable. "You say that device Jane and Loki cooked up actually works?" Darcy nodded. "I'd like to have a look at that thing. After all, by contract, any tech Jane develops belongs to us, anyway."

Darcy lifted her chin and gave Fury a knowing smirk. "So basically, nothing your people have tried

works, right?" Fury didn't reply. "Jane used materials belonging to Tony Stark, so maybe we should just give it to him."

Fury shook his head, expression annoyed and weary. "Maybe I should let you shoot her," he said to Natasha. Leaning across the desk, he pinned Darcy with his intense stare. "Starting now, you're going to stop playing detective." Before she could protest, he added, "If you don't, it's you, not Loki, who's going to be spending quality time in one of our holding cells."

"Will I have my iPod?"

"Hell, no."

"That's cruel and unusual punishment."

"What's cruel," Fury leaned forward, "is having to tell your next of kin that you're now one of the dearly departed." He waved his hand dismissively at her, though not Sean. "We're done here. Take her back to the lab." Natasha moved toward Darcy.

Darcy stood, but didn't move for the door. "Are you going to fire Sean? It really wasn't his fault."

This earned her an exasperated huff from Fury. "Are you nuts? He's invaluable. Keeps the GAO auditors off our butts. You, on the other hand..."

Darcy got the hint and trooped obediently after Natasha.

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A few feet from the door to the Fish Bowl, Darcy put her hand on Natasha's arm, stopping her. "I've got a favor to ask."

"This have something to do with me being around till Friday?"

"Yes." In the lab, Thor and Jane had spotted her and Darcy gave them a reassuring wave. Loki, seated at the table, apparently trying to explain something to Thor, judging from his sour expression, paid her and Natasha no mind. "Ever heard of Zozobra?"

"Some kind of yearly ritual in Santa Fe; they burn a huge puppet?"

Darcy nodded. "Ever since Thor and Loki moved in, Jane hasn't had a life. Less of life than before, which was close to dead, anyway.

"At this rate, Jane's going to turn into a crazy old lady who lives with a bunch of cats. Except instead of cats, it'll be hot guys with superpowers." With a shrug, she added, "Okay, that doesn't actually sound so bad."

"Unless one of the guys is Loki," noted Natasha.

Darcy stifled the need to say, "Oh, he's not so bad." Instead she explained her plan to Natasha. "I want to take Jane to Zozobra in Santa Fe, this Thursday evening. With Thor and Loki, because Jane won't going to go unless big blond comes along."

She held up one finger. "My first challenge is getting Loki to agree to go. Used to be he couldn't wait to go out and crush us mortals. Now he's got supervillain agoraphobia." She added a second finger to the first. "Next I need to get him out of Asgard clothes." At that, her brain skipped and got stuck on "...get him out of clothes."

Aware that Natasha was watching her, she took a deep breath and continued. "Get him out of Asgard clothes and into regular mortal clothing."

Holding up a third finger, she got to the last problem. "Fury isn't going to let us take the boys from Asgard, especially Loki, that far from home without a security escort, which is where you come in."

"I do?" said Natasha, dryly.

"Sure. Why sent six men to do the job of one woman?"

Natasha sniffed. "I smell flattery."

"I bet it smells like chocolate." Darcy beamed. "If you come along, we won't need a security escort, because you're awesome."

"Laying it on thick, aren't you?"

"Like clown makeup."

"No."

"Please!"

Natasha swept a lazy glare in Loki's direction. "Me and him in a car for several hours? Really?"

"Sounds fun, right?"

"Like a root canal."

"Come on. He'll behave. Or, at least, he'll ignore you. He's the God of Ignoring, now." Sensing that the SHIELD agent's resolve was weakening, she added, "I'll sit between you two crazy kids. You can ignore him too. Unless he gets out of line. In that case, 'Kapow!'"

"Okay."

"Okay? Seriously? Yay!" She grinned and threw her arms around Natasha, giving her a hug. The SHIELD agent stiffened and then gave Darcy an awkward pat on the back.

"Know why I agreed?" said Natasha with a slight smirk.

"No, why?"

Her gaze moved to Loki and back to Darcy. "Because that asshole will never agree to go."

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Dinner that evening was green chile cheeseburgers and fries, the burgers cooked on Thor's grill and the chile from Jane and Darcy's recent trip into town. Thor, who wasn't much for spicy food, opted for a plain cheeseburger. Loki, however, piled on extra slices of chile, though he picked suspiciously at the fries, as he did with any pre-packaged food. Darcy ate her share of fries and some off of his plate as well.

A while later, when Loki made for the door, destination his lair, Darcy hurried after him. Stopping on the porch, he stared out across the lot into the growing darkness. "Even at dusk, I have a shadow."



Just a step behind, Darcy grinned up at his back. "Kind of a pretty shadow, don't you think?"

Turning his head slightly to the right, he gave her sexy sly smile. "When it isn't talking."

"Liar. That's when you like me best."

He started down the stairs. "I see plans in your eyes and fear they don't portend well."

"One exploded building and I'm marked for life." She stomped down the stairs after him.

"Now you know how I feel."

Darcy snorted, but spared him her snark. No point in pissing him off. Of course, that made him more suspicious.

"No wry commentary on my missing sanity...marbles...whatever euphemism you usually prefer?"

"I've got a favor to ask." Ahead a small lithe shape emerged from the airplane cabin. Inkblot hunting for mice. With a little meow, he disappeared behind the cabin. Darcy, feeling like a Chihuahua after a Great Dane, quickened her pace to match Loki's long strides.

"No," said Loki, almost cheerfully.

"You didn't let me ask."

He plopped heavily in his usual seat on the right side of the cabin. "It involves Agent Romanoff, correct?"

Damn. He was good. She scrambled over his long legs, probably sprawled intentionally to keep her from sitting at his side, and positioned herself on his left. "Mostly it involves you, me, Thor and Jane. Natasha would just be along for the ride."

"No." Firmer this time.

"There's this thing called Zozobra happening Thursday night in Santa Fe. It's really kind of silly, but there's a giant burning puppet and noise, and loads of people and noise, and then more noise, which is a hella lot more fun than this place."

"Way to sell it," he said in a flat unaccented voice. "And, no."

"Why not? A few hours among mortals who don't have guns or blab about science. What could it hurt?" It was childish, but she goaded, "You afraid?"

"Don't be absurd." His leg started to twitch. "I am, nevertheless, at a slight disadvantage, given my current handicap."

"Somebody find a sparkly crown. Asgard's got a new drama queen." She rolled her eyes. "You've still got magic, even if you can't remember spells. Magic is probably a reflex for you." To prove her point, she made a loose fist and threw a halfhearted punch at his face, expecting him to dodge the blow with ease, or better yet, throw up some kind of magic shield.

The shock of the impact, her knuckles hitting the side of his face, startled her as much as him. He turned on her, expression thunderous, eyes blazing, a suggestion of red in the green. Before she could react, his hand clamped around her wrist, and she was yanked into his face.

Anger transformed his face, stripping away the veneer of humanity.

"Shit, I'm sorry. I'm sorry-sorry-sorry." Adrenaline raced through her blood, her heart pounding in her ears. "I thought you saw me, I was totally in your line of sight..." Her voice trailed off, as a tiny idea took seed and grew in her mind. Last night, she'd thrown the pillow at his left side and he'd barely blocked it. "Whoa," she said, just as he released her, anger fading from his face, traded for something furtive.

Settling back into her seat, she studied him for a few seconds, waiting for his temper to cool. When it seemed safe, she waved her hand over his left eye. "You're blind in this eye."

"No." He snatched her wrist again. "Not entirely."

"Leggo." She twisted in his grip and again, he let go. "Not entirely?"

"I was blind in that eye, now I see...shadows and light. My sight is returning, slowly."

"Thor doesn't know, does he?"

"No!" He turned the full ferocity of his gaze on her. "And he can't know! It's bad enough to be...incapacitated. I will not suffer that dolt's pity."

"Yeah, it really sucks, having someone love you, unconditionally." The statement earned her a look that could peel the paint off the side of a building, but Darcy tilted her head and faced him fearlessly.

It was Loki who broke eye contact, dropping his gaze to his hands which were clenched in fists. "And you would use this against me, to force me to attend this mortal celebration."

She blinked. "That would be my evil plan." The thought hadn't yet occurred to her, but hey, why not?

"If I agree, you will not tell Thor or Jane about my infirmity."

"It's our secret." A rueful smile pulled at the corners of her mouth. It was almost too easy. Like taking candy from a baby. A big, dangerous baby with a killer smile and a personality to match who had a tendency to hold grudges for centuries. She reached for his sleeve, closing her fingers around leather and padded cloth and giving it a tug. "You're going to have to lose the Asgard threads, too."

Loki stared down at her hand on his arm. "I'm not mortal. Why should I play at one?"

"Because you're Loki and going incognito is part of your shtick." The cloth was thick but soft as silk. "Black hair, green eyes, tall and devastatingly good looking." His eyes met hers and too her annoyance, she blushed. "Even in Midgard clothes, you'll probably attract so much female attention, I'll have to beat them off with a stick."

Loki smirked. "That I'd like to see."

"You will if you're a good little god of mischief and play along with my plan." Her hand had conveniently slid down over his and with her thumb, she traced a line over his knuckles then down his index finger, feeling the shape of the long bones under his skin.

He reversed his hand, taking hers and lifting it to what little light remained. "More bruises. I hurt you again," he said, obviously chagrined.

"Those are from yesterday when I fell on the curb." She twisted awkwardly in his grip, so he could

see the dark smudges of bruises on her elbow. There was a matching set on her other arm.

"But just now?" she said. "I kind of provoked you."

Her hand still in his, he set the full force of his stare on her, long lines of his face set in determined lines. "Do not make excuses for my behavior. Or anyone else's, should they strike at you in stupid anger. The fault lies with me, not you." A tiny smile played on his lips. "As you've noted, you cannot hurt me." Moving her hand toward his face, his clever fingers moved across her skin, investigating the shape of her fingers as though he'd never seen a hand before.

Lust and something much deeper pulsed through her in tiny shivers. She was starting to believe that Loki was doing something more than tolerate her. But why? Even half blind and with his brains scrambled like eggs, the likes of Loki Laufeyson didn't bother with alliances unless they benefited him in some way. To him, the universe was a vast chessboard and Darcy Lewis was less useful than a pawn. But here in the comforting gloom of the old airplane cabin, she could let herself nurture the stupid hope that maybe, against all logic, he felt a measure of affection for her.

If she were a braver person; if she could express herself in more than irreverent wisecracks, she would have told him that it took a whole lot more booze than one glass of wine to get her drunk. That she had kissed him because against all reason, she was probably all ready half in love with the irascible bastard.

But as with Jane, earlier that morning, she best she could do was a smaller truth. "I feel safe with you. Does that make any sense?"

Dark eyebrows lifting to make a peak above his forehead, he blinked, expression confused. "No. It does not." With deliberate care, he released her hand, setting it on the armrest. Tap, tap, tap. His boot heel rapped on the cabin's floor. "Particularly, since I find you more than a little unnerving." Lifting his right hand, he moved his fingers in undulating waves, as if casting a spell, but Darcy sensed no magic.

If Darcy was right, if being twitchy was his tell, there was a measure of truth in what he said. She felt a laugh bubbling up in her chest. Loki, who'd followed Thor and company into centuries of bloody battles, and most recently, led a massive alien army against the Avengers and the God of Thunder, was unnerved by her?

"I must be some kind of scary monster."

Fey humor shown in his eyes as he cast her a sideways glance. He reached to her, setting long fingers on the top her head and twisted, ruffling her hair. "My beloved monster."

She swatted at his hand, but he evaded her easily. In an instant, he was on his feet. With two long strides, he stood at the cabin's threshold, looking out, head turning back and forth as if searching for something. She had a feeling that he wanted to flee, but with quick sigh, he braced his arm against the wall and leaned, his back to her.

She combed her fingers through her hair, trying to fix the mess he had made. Loki was now staring up at the night sky. One of the nice things about living in the boondocks was that out there, one could actually see the stars, even the cloudy white spray that made up the Milky Way. He seemed to have forgotten she was there, and she took the opportunity to watch this unguarded version of Loki. Still vibrating with goofy energy, his body language was youthful, and Darcy realized she was getting another glimpse of the Loki that Thor remembered from long ago. She swallowed a tiny lump of grief that welled up in her throat, struck by a guilty sense that it was ever-loyal Thor, not her, who deserved to see this.

Then the moment passed. The familiar hardness returned to the set of his shoulders, weary bitterness emanating from his tall, slim silhouette. She got up and stood at his side.

"I need to devise a means of keeping you from the errant dreamer that doesn't require my presence," he said.

She couldn't resist. "If the floor is that bad, the offer for the bed still stands."

He didn't acknowledge her statement. "Soon, Thor will be off again with the Avengers and me with him. You'll need protection in my absence."

"Oh." In the brothers' absence, without Thor's jovial presence and Loki, the skulking yin to his yang, the house always felt a little hollow. Now, the thought of Loki's leaving made her hurt inside. She looked at him and he spared her a brief glance, shoulders slumping imperceptibly, knowing what came next. Obviously he could read her like a cheap novel, but he flinched anyway when she wrapped her arms around his waist. *Boy's got issues being touched*. Even so, he dropped his chin against the top of her head, gusting a long breath through her disheveled hair.

It was Darcy who broke the hug. Knowing Loki, he'd come out to his lair for some alone time, probably having exceeded his capacity for social interaction hours ago. Since she had successfully conned him, through dumb luck, into going to Zozobra, she decided to move on while she was still ahead.

In the house, she hung out with Thor and Jane, watching one of the many incarnations of a crime show, *CSI Topeka, Kansas* or something along those lines, and then went to bed.

When she woke later, it wasn't to the nightmare, but the awareness of someone near. Rolling over, she found Loki, his back to her, asleep on top of the covers. She considered the dark, indistinct shape of him and several ideas, all X-rated, marched through her sleepy head. As she listened to the soft, easy whoosh of his breathing, a goal anchored itself in her mind. Like most of her plans, it wasn't well thought out, or grounded in any reason.

She would make him hers, somehow.

"...I find you more than a little unnerving," he had said. So pouncing on him like a cat on catnip would probably send him back on the floor, or out of the room entirely.

Instead, she decided to approach him as if he was a skittish wild animal, easy spooked. She eased herself closer, and pressed her face against his back. The cadence of his breathing remained the same, so she pushed one step farther, slipping her arm around him and snuggling closer. At first, her contact went unnoticed and she was starting to drift off to sleep, when he jerked under her touch. She felt his hand around her arm and sighed, assuming he was going to push her way. Then, with a slight hesitation, he grasped her hand in his and pressed it to his chest.

Every nerve in her body tingled with the awareness of him so tantalizingly close, but she didn't move. She thought of Thor, who brightened whenever Loki graced him with more than a nasty growl and understood. With Loki, you were grateful for any little victories.

His breathing slowed again, and she followed him into sleep.

# Chapter 15

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Wednesday morning started off well, even though Darcy was seriously considering rescinding Loki's invite to sleep in the bed. The problem with sharing a bed with a Prince of Asgard was that "share" wasn't a part of the royal lexicon. Probably accustomed to a bed the size of her bedroom, Loki soon went from cuddly to megalomaniac intent on taking over the bed.

Early on, she staved off his unconscious Manifest Destiny of the bed with hard jabs to the ribs. But by about four AM, he slipped into Loki-coma and became an immovable collection of long arms and legs. In the weak morning light, she lay on the very edge of the bed, eyes on the Taser on the dresser, comforting herself with the fantasy of lighting the God of Sprawl up like Christmas with 50K volts of electricity.

He was saved from a very sparky awakening by the sight of the rose on the side table, which had lost another petal, but was still crimson gorgeous in the morning light. Reminded that he was only irritating 90-percent of the time, and occasionally adorable, she got up and with one last longing look at the Taser, went about starting the day.

Around forty-five minutes later, she exacted a small revenge when she woke him, jumping up and down on the bed (and sometimes - oops! - on him) and yelling, "Earthquake. It's the end of the world. Armageddon, doomsday, zombieapocalypse. Earthquake!"

By the fourth iteration of her chant, his eyes opened a crack. A hand clamped around her ankle, yanking her off balance, and suddenly she was on her back, him above her, her hands held to the bed by his. The bed was still shaking from her efforts.

"The noble cockroach is too good for you," he said. "In light of your aptitude for leaping, I should turn you into a flea."

She stared up at him, stunned, a flush of fear sending panicky tremors through her muscles. His words didn't frighten her; she could see the humor in his eyes. What sent adrenaline through her system was how fast he'd subdued her, the overpowering and abrupt sense of helplessness she felt, trapped under him, his grip abnormally strong. The combination of inhuman strength and his utter maleness triggered a deep-seated and formerly well-buried memory. She twisted and pulled futilely in his powerful grip. "Let go."

And he did, so quickly that her arms flailed downward in surprised freedom. The logical section of her mind protested her overreaction. This was Loki - her Loki? - the guy she'd invited into her bed and who'd been an annoyingly perfect gentleman. If his kink was rape, he'd already had plenty of chances in the wee hours of the night when the household was asleep. Even with his spluttering magic and broken brain, he was probably still too powerful to find any sport in forcing himself on a woman whose only defense was a smart ass mouth.

In that moment, though, he wasn't just Loki; his aggressive posture filled her head with images of someone else. Dumb animal terror reigned over reason. "Get the fuck off me!" she snarled.

For a fleeting moment, hurt and confusion took over his face, and then he slipped behind the usual frigid mask. He pushed himself to his hands and knees, gaze on her. His cool exterior cracked as realization moved behind his eyes; his eyes narrowed, angry and looking at her but not quite seeing her.

Heart still racing at breakneck speed, she turned her gaze to the ceiling, to the spot of texture that looked like dragon. She wasn't sure which was worse. The brief wounded look on his face or that he knew what had made her come unglued. Feeling him retreating, physically and emotionally, her mind fumbled through the remains of fear, trying to find calm. She rose onto her elbows. If she didn't do something, he might decide she was a stupid girl, prone to idiot hysterics, or even worse, fragile.

Grabbing his arm, she said, "Hey, I, uh, it's not you." She let go. "Well, it is, sort of. You're scary strong. And scary..." He arched an eyebrow at her and she thought she saw a hint of humor returning. "The super speed wrestling move freaked me out."

His answer was to reach to her, hands on either side of her face, and kiss her forehead. "I know." With that he moved off her and flopped on his back at her side. He heaved a sigh and closed his eyes.

Darcy, still on her elbows, looked down at him. "So terrorizing stupid mortals isn't entertaining enough to wake you up?"

His mouth twitched and she got a glimpse of green eyes. "As you might say, 'Been there, done that, got bored.'" He shut his eyes again. "And you are not stupid."

With grin, she sank back into the bed, her shoulder against his, their heads sharing the same pillow. Concentrating on deep breaths, she worked to calm her heartbeat. "Have your mornings always been sponsored by a shit-load of caffeine, or is this new?"

His head tilted slightly in her direction, eyes opened sleepily. "My sleeping habits have always been erratic. Of late, however, I can't seem to fall asleep and when I do, waking is a misery."

"Maybe you need a warm glass of milk before bed," offered Darcy. "Or...a lot more wine."

"Right. Alcoholism. Because one can never have too many vices."

"In the new politically correct world, alcoholism isn't a vice, it's a disease." He snorted at that. "Can you or Thor even get addicted?"

"We are capable of the same excesses as mortals, but with much more dramatic results."

"Several million dollars in damage to buildings, infrastructure, Starbucks franchises, etcetera...*is* dramatic," agreed Darcy.

"And I was completely sober."

Darcy was about to ask if one could get drunk on crazy when the door to Jane's room opened with light squeak. Jane's voice said, "Are you sure you didn't leave it in the living room?"

"Well, no," was Thor's reply. "It was in your room the last I remember it, before we, uh..."

Jane giggled. Loki and Darcy looked at each other and rolled their eyes in tandem. Anticipating his snide comment, Darcy said, "iPad. They're looking for Jane's iPad, not Thor's brain." The search for the disappearing tech was a regular routine in the household. Loki claimed he had nothing to do with the vanishing iPad. Darcy almost, but not quite, believed him.

Thor and Jane's voices faded as they moved toward the living room and kitchen. A minute later, Jane appeared in Darcy's doorway. "Have you seen...?"

Darcy sat up and met Jane's confused and mildly embarrassed stare. "You need to LoJack that thing," she observed. "And no, we haven't seen your iPad." Loki hadn't moved, gaze on the ceiling, apparently oblivious to Jane's presence.

"Are *we* sure?" said Jane directing the question at Loki, with surprising boldness.

The only thing that moved on Loki was his mouth, into a nasty sneer. "The very manner in which you organize your life and belongings is so suffuse with chaos and disorder that I'd risk tearing apart the very fabric of the universe by introducing more."

Darcy snorted a laugh before she could stop herself.

Jane ran her fingers through shower-damp hair and smiled darkly. "He may have a point," she admitted. "What are you two doing, anyway?"

"Debating what color to paint the ceiling," said Darcy. "I say a warm beige with more sunflowers." She used her thumb to point at Loki, who remained immobile. "He, of course, votes for green."

Jane shook her head, wearily. "I think I liked you two better when you were at each other's throats. Now you're like two co-conspirators."

"I found it!" said Thor's triumphant bass from the living room and Jane hurried away.

Loki stared unblinking at the ceiling. With a tilt of the head, he said, "Green might work."

"Yuck." She picked up another pillow and dropped it on his face. "Get up before the queen of the lab gets back."

Shoving the pillow aside, he sat up. "I thought you were queen of the lab."

"I am." She shot a nervous glance at the door. "But when she's PMS-ing, I let her have the crown for a few days. Keep the peace, you know?"

"Peace. Yuck." He was now staring at the door, most of the sleep gone from his eyes.

Darcy wasn't sure if he was joking. She also wasn't sure if she cared. As she contemplated the moral (or was is immoral?) implications of going all squishy for a supervillain, Loki exacted his revenge for the rude awakening.

His sneaky smile should have been the clue that he was up to no good. He didn't use magic or any guile. He just put his mouth on hers and woke up parts of her body that had gone into hibernation from lack of use. His left arm pulled her closer to his heat, his right hand found her left breast, thumb tracing wide circles over the ample upper curve. Any of her previous fears dissipated since this felt totally safe and completely sexy.

She went limp in his arms as ferocious, aching need pooled between her thighs. She wanted to tell him to magic the door shut, and do more than kiss her, but his mouth exerted the perfect combination of fierce pressure and tantalizing gentleness that she couldn't speak. Apparently, at some point, he'd found his memories of kissing.

And then he was gone. Sauntering out the door, or at least as much as Loki sauntered in the morning, leaving her panting and gaping with need on her bed. She grabbed a pillow to throw at him, but he was already in his room.

Without any other recourse, she glared at him through breakfast, until Thor finally asked, "Loki,

what have you done this time?" Loki, who had developed a sudden fascination with the morning parade of New Mexico's best and worst criminals, as reported on the morning television news, turned and favored Thor with a wide-eyed, baffled shrug.

"Ah, *that* look," said Thor, rubbing a hand over his beard. "What did he do, Darcy?"

"More like what he didn't do," grumbled Darcy. She really wanted to tell Thor that his little brother had revved her up like a race car and then left her idling alone on the track, but Jane's world-weary expression stopped her. She really didn't want another lecture.

When they left the house, Loki waited for her on the porch and walked down the steps with her. "Oh, go on," he said silkily, "You're not that angry."

Biting back a smile, she marched angrily to the vehicle. She only managed to sulk a couple minutes before something on the side of the road caught her eye. They were about a mile down the road, approaching the four-way intersection where the south side of the roadway and nearby properties were a charcoaled monument to a recent wildfire. "Check it out." Reaching across the seat, she plucked at his sleeve. He looked up from some light reading, *Scientific American*, and out the window where she pointed. "Somebody is fixing up one of the burned-out buildings."

The SUV inched up to the stop sign, and they all turned their attention to the burn scar and the lot on the southeast corner. A red van with a trailer was parked near the remains of a large hay barn. Lumber, two-by-fours, sheathing and other construction stuff was loaded in the back of the trailer. A man was setting up a table saw nearby, while another un-spoiled hose from a small gas-powered air compressor.

Loki eyed the operation dubiously. "Wouldn't it be wiser to demolish the building altogether and begin anew?"

"I think so," said Jane. "I don't know much about construction, but the fire must have made the building structurally unsound."

"Perhaps," offer Thor, "they are being 'green?'" He turned to Jane. "That's the word, isn't it? Green?" She nodded. "It's a large building, a good deal of wood to reuse."

Loki sneered at the back of Thor's head, obviously ready to express his disdain for that theory, but Darcy poked him in the ribs before he could voice his vicious thoughts. The four stared a little longer at the new project, before Jane drove on and Darcy grinned at the idea of the physicist, her assistant and the two princes gawping like ordinary nosy neighbors. A glance back at their security escort in the black SUV showed that the guards were similarly distracted. Make the same drive five days a week and anything different is fascinating.

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There were something to be said for boring. It was a huge improvement over been hauled to Director Fury's office by a super spy/assassin for a grilling over her latest crime. Over the course of the morning, the phone had only run twice: one call from Jane's Japanese scientist friends, and the second from Erik. Thor's Angry Birds addiction was back with a vengeance, with everyone rolling their eyes at him, or, in Loki's case, leveling scathing glances his way.

The only excitement had occurred when Loki's latest equation, when run on a particular batch of data, stripped all the color from Darcy's computer screen, while making the Fish Bowl's fluorescent lights emit a constantly changing spectrum of color, from purple to orange.



Thor smiled up at the lights, his handsome face beaming delight. "It's like the BiFrost!" Loki scowled, but Jane's eyes lit up and she spent the morning excitedly reexamining the data. Loki got the lights back to white by rearranging the equation so that it took the solution and broke it back out into the original data. Darcy, however, discovered that the only cure for the whacked-out screen was to pull the video card out of the computer and reinstall it again.

Loki, whose magical solutions had only managed to turn the screen into various shades of one-color monochrome, grinned wearily, ruffled her hair and said, "An inelegant solution, but a solution nonetheless." Feeling a surge of pride, she watched his reflection in the glass wall as he sat, slumped over his original equation, trying to sort out what went wrong.

The tippy-tap of little feet announced the arrival of the gray lizard as it scampered along her desk. "Aren't you an illusion? How do you make noise?" The little beast's only answer was the customary perusal of her chest. Darcy swatted lazily at the magical voyeur and it scurried away. Her stomach growled loudly and she opened her email and sent a message to Sean. "Hey. Will your mom, a.k.a. Nick Fury, let you come out and play?"

Sean responded with, "He says you're a bad influence."

"So lunch is out?"

"Ten minutes. Break room?"

The new guard assigned to their floor, Deloris McHugh, obviously a card-carrying member of the Loki-Guilt-by-Association party, turned a sour expression on Darcy as she made for the elevator. With her warm mahogany skin tone, green eyes and striking bone structure, Deloris would have been pretty if not for the permanent lemon-sucking expression on her face.

Darcy's first impulse was to point out, nastily, that Botox was supposed to prevent frown lines, not make them. Instead, in honor of Max and Andy's memory, she took a deep breath, forced a smile and asked if she could get the guard anything from the break room. Deloris surprised her by grudgingly asking for a coffee.

"Tased any drunks lately?" asked Pam when Darcy stepped out of the lift at Floor One.

"I've upgraded. Now I'm blowing things up."

Pam laughed. "Right. Your psycho houseguest is rubbing off on you."

"Like a rash," Darcy agreed, with an embarrassed smirk.

The two nondescript agents in black suits were back, seated in their preferred space in the corner of the breakroom. Sean was standing at their table, chatting. The three men noted her entrance, but only Sean acknowledged her, smiling his quiet smile. Darcy wondered if the two men were just glorified bureaucrats rather than spies, since they seemed to spend too much time in town to be doing anything very James Bond.

A few tables away, Sarah and Cammie, the lab assistants from Floor Four, watched Sean like lovesick teens. Darcy scored icy nods from them, which, honestly, was an improvement over the usual pissy glares.

Sean nodded goodbye to the two men and moved to meet her at the vending machines. The bruises under his eyes had faded, and the whites of his eyes only marred by a few flecks of red vessels. But his posture was shadowed with a new weariness.

There was a new vending machine that dispensed Indian food. Darcy got a plate of saag paneer with rice. Dinner that night was going to be greasy pizza. She figured she needed something green to balance her diet. Sean, however, eyed the largely vegetarian fare, made a face and said, "Top of the food chain, I eat meat," and got a Rueben sandwich and a coffee.

After she'd heated her meal in the microwave, they sat and began to eat. "You've got fan girls," noted Darcy, with a not-so-subtle jerk of the head towards Sarah and Cammie.

"If those two," he said, blue eyes narrowing, mouth in an angry line, "spent as much time doing science as they did telling stories about you and Loki, they'd have found a cure for every disease known to humankind."

"Stories, huh?" Darcy took a sip of her drink, ice tea. "Like, naughty bedtime stories?"

"Definitely not Disney." He slid a dark glance in the women's direction. "I wouldn't worry about it, Darcy." With a shrug, he said, "Even if it was true, it's none of their damn business."

She studied his face, eyes moving over his strong cheekbones, the shape of his mouth, detecting no jealousy. "I have a confession to make." She took in the room, wondering if there were listening devices or cameras secreted in the corners and under tables. Probably, but what she was going to say wasn't exactly a surprise to SHIELD anyway.

Sean grinned. "This sounds serious."

Taking a bite of food for courage, she chewed swallowed and then said, "Loki and I aren't lovers, but I don't exactly hate him. In fact, we're kind of friends."

Sean response was a bigger grin. "Well, duh."

"It's that obvious?"

He plucked a sugar packet from the little black plastic box in the center of the table and moved it through his fingers the way a stage magician would a coin. "Well, you've never outright said, 'I hate Loki.' You complain about his weird habits, but you haven't tried to get him kicked out of the house."

"Like that would happen."

"Yeah," Sean said, tearing the sugar open and dumping it into his coffee, "I think it would. If you wanted him out today, he'd be gone last week. When you get your teeth into an idea, you're like a shark."

"A shark? That's better than rat or insect." To Sean's baffled look, she said, "Inside joke. So do you hate me?"

His vivid blue eyes looked right then left and then focused on her. "Because...you don't hate Loki?" She nodded. "I don't know the person you know. I know what he's done, but I don't have a personal connection to the events here, in town, or in New York." A question started to burn in his eyes. "If you think he's changed..."

She pushed the fork through her lunch, looking for little bits of cheese. "I don't know. Thor seems to think he's improved."

"Thor's not exactly a reliable character witness," said Sean, smile fading.

Pam and another SHIELD guard walked into the break room. Darcy waved and Sean looked over his shoulder and waved too. "I think he's changed, a little," said Darcy, "But he's still Loki, all mischief and chaos. I mean, he's like a ga-gillion years old. Even with all the money in Asgard, he probably still couldn't buy a clue about what it is to be human." As she spoke, the realization of what she was saying set in.

Sean nodded. "Neither could Thor."

She started to say that Thor was different, but stopped. Amiable Thor seemed human, but Sean was right. He'd been shaped by the same forces as Loki, century after long century. It really was easy, living with the two brothers, in a totally mundane context, to forget that they were actually, for all intents and purposes, as alien as a Chitauri.

"Loki is a total PITA," she said. Sean looked confused. "Pain-In-The-Ass. But other than the time he dyed my laundry Grinch green, he's never done anything all that bad to me. Sometimes...sometimes he's almost nice."

"Like when you hurt your leg?" he said with a knowing smile.

"Yeah." She laughed. "What don't you know about around here?"

"Very little." He smiled, a real smile with teeth. "Everything, money *and* information, trickles through accounting and the admin offices." The smile shifted, turning sort of wry. "And for some reason, people tell me stuff. Even stuff I really don't want to know."

"Sean O'Malley, accountant and priest confessor." No doubt, some people tried to get past his pleasant but impenetrable walls with Trojan horses made of their secrets. They thought he'd open up if they went into too-much-information mode. Darcy had sized-up Sean early on and knew the ploy wouldn't work. Besides, she had her secrets and wasn't about to begrudge him his.

He responded to her comment with a fleeting smile. "Since we're in the confessional," he said, making the sign of the cross with the practiced ease of a Catholic, "I should have told you this earlier." He sort of squirmed, an out-of-character gesture for him. "I'm...I'm not exactly over my ex."

"Ex? Wife?"

"Fiancée."

Darcy took a few more bites of her lunch. That explained a lot. "Any chance you'll get back together?" It was probably none of her business, but that didn't stop her mouth from moving.

"No." He met her eyes and she gulped, taken back by the wrenching pain on his handsome face. "She passed away."

"I'm sorry." She broke away from his stare, feeling like a jerk for asking. No wonder he was so totally unavailable.

"Don't be. It wasn't your fault." He reached across the table and squeezed her hand, briefly. When she looked up his attention was firmly on his lunch. She studied him, his long fingers and raw-boned beauty, and grimly acknowledge she definitely had a type. Beautiful, broken men.

"You know," said Sean after a few minutes of silence, "if there's a club for people who blow up small towns, you, me and Loki are now charter members."

"We're more like unwilling accomplices, since it was Edwards who actually set up the bomb."

"Fury said Edwards did some kind of demolitions work when he was in the military. He probably still had some connections, underground connections, that allowed him to get the plastic explosives he used for his security system."

"Fury said Edwards had PTSD, right?" said Darcy.

Sean rubbed his fingers gingerly through his hair, obviously avoiding the gash on his scalp. "You must be rubbing off on me because after you left, I starting asking Fury questions about Edwards and King."

"Welcome to the dark side, my young apprentice."

"Edwards Heating and Cooling, the building anyway, only sustained minor damage from Loki's attack. But beyond that, Edwards didn't have any connection to Loki. No friends or family injured or killed in either attack."

"What about King?"

"He lost an uncle in New York, and a friend on the SHIELD Helicarrier."

"But King is now the one with an extra hole in his head."

Sean nodded. "It doesn't make sense, does it?"

Darcy watched Sarah and Cammie as they picked up the napkins, cardboard coffee cups and plates from their lunch and dumped them in the red rubbish bin by the front counter. Detectives in novels and on-screen always made it look so easy, putting together disparate connections and solving the crime with aplomb. What did Edwards exploding his own business have to do with Loki and the murders? What about the traces of magic in the building and maps of the SHIELD facility? Perhaps Edwards had nothing to do with the Andy and Max's deaths?

"Was Edwards having money troubles?" she asked. "Maybe he bought a fat life insurance policy for King."

"Or maybe it's a case of property insurance fraud. Blow up the building, collect a payoff." He shrugged. "Not a smart way to approach it, though. If the investigation turns up the bomb, the insurer won't pay."

"Except SHIELD is involved and the official cause of the explosion is a gas leak," noted Darcy.

"I can run a credit check on both men," Sean offered. "Poke around a little."

"Would you? Thanks." Fury said she wasn't supposed to do any more investigating. She decided not to ask if Sean was operating under the same prohibition.

They ate in companionable silence for a while. As she stabbed the last chunk of cheese in the saag paneer, she asked, "You okay? You look really tired."

He didn't seem to have heard her, instead reaching for his coffee cup. Lifting it, he stared at it and she realized it was empty. His hand clenched on the tan cardboard surface and then he set it down. A few tables away, Pam and the other guard laughed at something and the sound felt oddly jarring.

"My mom's not doing too well," he said, blue eyes intent on the cup. Out of habit, he raked his

finger through his hair and winced, obviously hitting the cut on his scalp. "My sister's freaked out. She's never seen her this bad."

Although he'd never gotten into the details, he had told her that his mother suffered from some kind of mental illness. She remembered that he had brothers, but apparently, the care of their ailing mother fell entirely on Sean and his sister. Darcy felt the twitchy urge to fiddle with her own hair, to lose herself in contemplation of the shiny lowlights, because his misery was bleeding out to her and she felt the need to do something, but didn't know exactly what.

"You'll be going out to San Diego again?"

He nodded.

"If there's anything I can do, let me know." That's what people said at a time like this, right? In this kind of situation, when her clever zingers were completely inappropriate, she felt awkward and hopeless, out of touch with her own species. He nodded and they finished eating

Outside the break room, he started to walk her to the lift, but she turned toward his office. He followed. At the comptroller's office she stopped and looked at him. What she saw didn't remind her of Loki anymore. Instead she thought of Thor, bound by duty and unfailing love to a brother who was lost even to himself. "I mean it. If you need me to, uh, water your plants, bring in the mail, whatever, let me know." She gave him a one-handed hug, Deloris's coffee and a bag containing Jane and Thor's lunch in her other hand.

"Thanks," he said.

Thoughts still on Sean and his mom, she didn't grumble when Pam's relief guard, a snotty blond jarhead who knew damn well who she was, insisted on calling in her ID to make sure it was legit and checking her bag for contraband. Back in the Fish Bowl, she watch Thor and Loki's reflections in the glass as they replayed the daily drama - Thor offering Loki one of his sandwiches; Loki snottily refusing. Feeling humbled by Thor's devotion and more than a little guilty, she vowed to call her brother later that evening.

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After she rang off, Darcy realized she preferred her sister-in-law to her own brother. Not that they actually disliked each other. They just had nothing in common besides DNA. Anette, on the other hand, was funny and smart and got Darcy's humor.

Darcy was sitting on her bed, back against the headboard, cell phone in hand. The murmur of the television came from the living room, and the smell of fresh coffee was in the air. No doubt, Jane self-medicating for a late night of obsessing about her research. The view outside the window was darkness that mirrored back the room, Loki's rose, and Darcy when she got up to drop down and shut the blinds.

She shuddered, thinking that just a few days before someone had marched across the property and dumped a formerly live human being on the porch. Being alone didn't feel like a good idea, so she decided to go hang out with the Jane and Thor.

Loki's door was half open, unusual for him. He sat on his bed, facing the door, head bowed as he tinkered with some tiny weapon of mass destruction. Tools - screwdrivers, a circuit tester, a box of assorted electrical connections, wire strippers, spools of wire, and even a soldering gun - were strewn across Thor's unused bed. In his Asgard-lite green and black, Loki looked like a geek who'd gotten so wrapped up in building a replica of the Millennium Falcon, that he'd forgotten the SF

convention was today. A really sexy geek.

A bright idea doing the shining light bulb thing above her head, she headed for the kitchen. The happy couple was parked in front of the television, Jane with her nose in the iPad, and Thor watching a football game. Darcy nodded to them and continued on to the kitchen where she opened the utensil drawer. Fortunately, neither one, particularly Thor, noticed the spoons in her hands as she left the kitchen.

The utility room was right behind the second bathroom. A door, along with the washer and dryer took up the outside wall. The cabinets above held laundry detergent, cat food, dog treats and other crap that didn't have a home elsewhere in the house. The water heater and water pressure tank stood like cylindrical guards on the south wall.

The trunk freezer was positioned along the opposite wall. It had a clear glass top and the words "Marley's Natural Dog Food" printed on rim. Darcy had bought it for just \$40 from the local pet store when the owner realized that Puente Antiguo wasn't the market for expensive boutique dog foods.

Cold air rolled out of the freezer as she opened the lid, a small blessing since the room wasn't connected to the ducting and still held the late summer's heat. She peeled back two bags of frozen green chile and a box of corn to reveal...more green chile. Not believing her eyes, she reached farther feeling the cold plastic and hard contours of frozen chile pods. *Shit.*

Drawing back her hand and clenching iced fingers, she thought back to what Loki had said about his illusion. "It does more than merely bend the light. It operates on possibility, probabilities as you'd say here in Midgard, constructing a kind alternate reality where to the viewer, the unreal is real."

*Whatever that means.* She only knew of one possibility. That what she wanted was directly under the two bags of green chile and corn. Reaching down into the frigid compartment, she closed her eyes and decided that she definitely could feel the slick feel of frozen condensate over curved cardboard. And if she moved her fingers up over the icy surface, they'd come upon the ridge of the carton's lid. Nothing else could be possible.

Her fingers burned, sticking to frozen cardboard. Triumph thundering in her chest, she pulled the carton up, revealing a smiling cow logo and the label "Cookies & Cream."

"I totally rock," she announced as she pushed his door farther open, and boldly entered Loki's room.

He looked up from his fiddling, eyes settling on the carton in her hand. "You got past the illusion."

She swaggered up to him, a wiggle in her hips. "I got past Loki, God of Mischief's, illusion."

His lip twitched with derision, but humor sparkled in his eyes. "It was a feeble construction, crafted to sway a weak mind such as Thor's."

"What-ever. You hate it that I beat your illusion." She sat on the bed at his right side.

"No, I do not." He lifted the thing in his hand, a small box, and moved his index finger over its contents. Little gears started spinning, making a faint hum. "I'd hate it if you hadn't."

The heat of a blush warmed her cheeks, but she didn't know exactly why. She dug a spoon into the carton and came out with a mouthful. She waved it in front of his face. "Yum. Want some?" He watched the spoon like a dog watching a slice of bacon. "What's the magic word?" Arching her

eyebrows, she gave him a big closemouthed smile.

He responded with a narrow-eyed glare, but his attention quickly went back to the ice cream. "Please," he said in the tone of a man going to the gallows.

The plan was to just hand him the spoon, but on impulse she moved it closer to his face. "Open wide." Like every Darcy plan, it had a fatal flaw. Watching his lips move around the spoon reminded her of the other delicious things they could do. A hot flush of desire shot from her eyes to her groin.

Wrenching her gaze from his face, she focused on the thing in his hand. "What's that?" The box was made of blue plastic, the width and length of a smart phone, but about two inches thicker. The contents resembled the combination of a watch and the innards of a high tech device: two tiny circuit boards on one side, and the rest taken up by gears of various sizes.

"A device that generates a counter-frequency to the most frequently used magical harmonics."

Darcy pushed her spoon through the ice cream like a shovel, trying to maximize the amount of cookie in the scoop. Obviously, Loki was in "why be straightforward when you can make like Gandalf and fling out vague, incomprehensible magical babble" mode. In lieu of pushing him further, she lifted the spoon to her mouth and savored the cold creamy goodness,. The sugar must have stimulated her brain because after a few seconds she said, "It's nightmare repellent."

"Precisely."

"How's it powered?" She dug a new scoop and lifted it to his mouth.

After he swallowed, he answered. "At the moment, by my own energy."

"And when you're not around?" The question set off a dull ache in her heart. She eased her pain with more ice cream.

With a fluid turn of his wrist, the little device rotated and Darcy saw two ordinary household plugs. "On standard 110-volt current," he answered.

"What if Jane forgets to pay the bill, again? Or if there's a power outage?" She gave him another spoonful of ice cream.

His jaw moved as he savored the treat. "The first is unlikely as it's you, not Thor's pet, who is the glue that holds the household together. When's the last time she actually remembered to pay a bill without your prodding?"

Darcy shrugged. "Last year, maybe. With Erik being the prod." She stabbed the spoon into the ice cream like flag post and stared at it. Funny. Loki always seemed to be lost in his own dark, brooding world. She wouldn't have pegged him for noticing mundane, un-princely details like utility bills.

He flipped the little box over and tilted it so that she could see its interior better. "There's a spot for a battery backup and that little bit of crystal will also hold a charge and resonate at the correct frequency for about an hour."

"Cool," she said, although the thing probably meant no more Loki in her room at night. "Those little gears, they're from my watch, aren't they?" The innocent face was his answer. She held a hand up in surrender. "Fine. Whatever. It's not like you're stealing my panties and turning them into cute crafts to sell on Etsy."

Loki made a choking sound and then laughed, a real laugh with white teeth. "I, ah...hadn't thought of that." He smirked. "Yet."

"Perv," she said, handing him another spoonful of ice cream anyway.

He went back to fine tuning the magic repelling machine, turning a little screw buried deep in its workings with a small watchmaker's screwdriver. She eyed the tool, thinking that the only screwdrivers in the house were the full sized kind. Some of the tools and stuff on Thor's bed belonged to Jane, left over from the time when she had to jerry-rig her experimental equipment. Some, however, were brand new and probably stolen. If this was what a magically handicapped Loki looked like, the unimpaired version must have been truly scary.

There was also a book among the tools. Squinting because she wasn't wearing her glasses, she made out the title and cover. The book on Norse mythology that Erik had found at the local library.

When had Erik checked the book out? She should find a way to return it, except then someone might come looking for the overdue fines. By now that number must have been equal to the GDP of a small third-world country. Maybe Loki could figure out a way to magic it back on the library's shelves.

She leaned, nudging him gently with her shoulder. He turned and she pointed at the book. "What did you think?" There's was no question he'd read it. Leave Loki in a room with a book and he'd read the hell out of it, no matter what the topic or genre.

"Predictably simplistic."

"It's not *War and Peace*."

"I've read that," Loki said, almost brightly, as he started up the device, lifting it to his ear.

"Yeah, I know." That one took him a few days to read. "'Simplistic' as in missing all the juicy details?"

"Fortunately, yes." He mimicked her smarmy smirk and she smacked him on the shoulder. "I meant that like all mythology, it's less of a historically accurate retelling and more allegory, with the aim of imparting some great truth or lesson."

"Aesop's Fables, but without the cute animals."

"I'm a cute animal." He feigned hurt.

"Yes, you are and stop fishing for compliments." Another nudge. "Juicy details?"

"Alas, there are canyons of gaps in my memories. Perhaps I should set you to petition Odin for their return. You can be persuasive."

"My mouth and Odin in the same room? Really? I thought you liked me...a little."

"Odin is accustomed to sycophants and other cozeners. He wouldn't know what to make of you." He smiled, eyes distant.

"I think he'd make me into an amoeba." Or hire a dwarf to sew her mouth shut.

He laughed. "I wouldn't let that happen. An, insect, yes. But a single-celled organism? Unacceptable."



"Jerk."

In his hand, the little device was humming, the sound almost musical. He looked at the book. "The mortal conception of good and evil is wrapped up in their fears of the dark and the night."

"You mean, bad prince has black hair," she said, pointedly staring at his head, "and good prince is all Clairol Born Blond?"

It took a second for him to process the reference, but he got it. "Yes, but more so with skin color. Dark races are expected to be given to dark deeds."

She eyed the ice cream, made a promise to her thighs to bike tomorrow and got another scoop. "So are dark elves really evil?"

"A better question is, 'Are they really dark?'"

Nodding, she said, "Diversity in elf land. I guess not all evil things are ugly either." Her gaze tracked involuntarily to the sharp perfection of his features and recognized that that one might be hitting too close to home. She gave him a grin and shrugged.

"Loki, I-" Thor came striding into the room. He stopped, eyes moving from the ice cream, to Loki, then Darcy. She smiled at him; Loki's slight smile turned to a scowl.

"Ice cream?" she offered, cheerfully. Thor, however, stared at them, wordless. The emotion playing across his bearded face wavered between confusion and vague hurt. As she watched, he took a small step backward as if pushed, and he blinked, his gaze turning inward, thoughtful.

She glanced at the man at her side, but his attention was anywhere but on Thor, familiar haughty boredom on his lean face.

Completely perplexed, she looked at Thor, wondering what had crawled up his butt. Was he that upset over the secret ice cream stash? The big lug usually wasn't that petty. Or was this about her and Loki? Didn't Jane say he was cool with their relationship?

"S'up, Thor?" she tried, again.

"I..." he began and then shook his head. "Tis nothing." The usually gregarious prince seemed sort of deflated. "I will speak with you later, brother." He forced a smile. "Darcy." With a nod, he left. Darcy frowned, feeling for a second like Thor was annoyed with her.

Loki stood. "Come," he said. "Let's test the device."

She followed, knowing she'd get no answers about Thor's weird behavior from him. He plugged the thing into a socket in the hallway, explaining that it also used the home's wiring to generate a frequency through the house, and therefore it didn't need to be in her room.

"That's it?" she asked once he snapped a cover over the box and stood.

"That's it." He ruffled her hair. "Thank you for the ice cream."

"You're welcome," she answered, sensing the dismissal in his forced manners. But she realized she'd scored another victory tonight. Usually, even she stayed away from his room, having heard him verbally lacerate Thor and, once, Jane, for disturbing him there. Aided and abetted by ice cream, she had invaded his inner sanctum and lived to tell.

That didn't make his absence in her room later that night easy to take. Especially since she knew that the only thing standing between her and the nightmare was an untested fusion of magic and technology. By one o'clock in the morning, the need for rest overcame her fear of the dream and she fell into a deep sleep.

She woke to the half light of early morning. On her back, she blinked at the gray-whiteness of the ceiling, and felt a weight across her body. Lifting her head, she saw a black clad arm. Gaze tracking up the limb to its owner, she found him asleep at her side, on the covers, facing her. Turning, she saw that the clock radio's numbers read "4:52."

His pale face was peaceful but dark half circles shadowed his eyes. He appeared overly drawn and weary. In another one of his grim moods, he'd skipped dinner last night, but he hadn't looked that bad when she was in his room. What had he been up to in the night? With Thor playing the part of snuggly bear to Jane, Loki pretty much had the night to himself, unsupervised.

Since he was still cuddly and hadn't gone into bed hog mode, she assumed he hadn't been with her long. Something had kept him occupied for most of the night. Eyeing the clock, she decided to assume that whatever it was, it didn't involve blood, death or anything too horrible. She took his hand, tangled her fingers in his, and settled in for the last few hours of sleep before the new day.

## Chapter 16

### CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Darcy begin Thursday morning by trying to smother Loki.

It wasn't personal. Well, maybe a little. Her last two attempts to wake him had resulted in kissing, which was awesome, but she wasn't sure her lady parts could take the strain of being fired up and then ignored again.

Settling on her bed next to him, careful not to make contact, she picked up the extra pillow, dropped it on his face and held it there. Minutes passed and she stared out the window, past the red Asgard rose in its vase on the nightstand, to where a couple of little gray cottontail rabbits leaped at each other in the sand, turning somersaults. Loki slept on, unbothered, his chest rising and falling in an even rhythm.

Someone chuckled and she turned to find Thor in the doorway. "Now what has he done?" he asked.

"Nothin'." She gave him her best angelic smile. "I'm making science."

He rubbed his chin, puzzling over her comment. "You mean you are conducting an inquiry into the time required to suffocate my brother under a pillow?"

"Uh-huh." Nope, Thor wasn't so dim after all.

His bearded face split into a very Loki-like wicked grin. "You may need a few more pillows," he suggested before wandering off to slay a few Pop-Tarts.

Loki's breathing hitched, and then he sighed and muttered something.

"What's that?" She lifted the pillow off his face and leaned toward him.

His eyes were still shut. "I said, 'Once again Thor has abandoned me to cruel fate.'"

"You whine like a mosquito. Wake up." She replaced the pillow on his face.

With a growl, he swatted the pillow away. In the morning light, his face didn't look as gaunt as last night, but the dark circles under his eyes remained. Forgetting that she wasn't going to touch him this morning, she pressed her fingertips to the skin just under his right eye. "You look like crap. What did you do last night?"

"I conquered several small worlds. There was blood and chaos, and the music of the dying as they screamed in exquisite agony."

"Bullshit. You'd be way happier if that was true." She slid her fingers down his face and forced the corners of his mouth into a smile. "Truth. Don't lie. I know your tells."

At that, his eyes grew wide. "I have tells? What are they?"

"Dude. I'm so not giving away my one advantage. Last night. What happened?"

He stared up at her, black hair mussed, sleep gone from his green eyes and looking mildly startled. With a groan, he sat up and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. "You remain...unnerving."

"Last night?" She wasn't giving up. He started to get out of bed and she grabbed his arm. "Loki, please?"

He gently pried her fingers off his arm. "Better I tell you over breakfast. If I truly resemble 'crap,' then Thor will needle with the same query. I'd rather tell the tale once."

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Jane was washing Inkblot's water bowl when Darcy came into the kitchen. Thor munched on a Pop-Tart, reading a fantasy football article in *Sports Illustrated*. Seeing Darcy, he said, "Did Loki survive?"

"Just barely," replied Darcy.

Holding the bowl, now full of fresh water, Jane looked at them. Her mouth opened, and then she shook her head. "Never mind. I'd rather not know." Darcy and Thor grinned, watching her head outside with the cat's water supply.

Loki's arrival, several minutes later, was met the predicted concern from Thor. "Loki. Your eyes. What happened?" Jane, seated at Thor's side and now flipping through the *Sports Illustrated*, probably checking out the tight ends on tight ends, looked up and frowned.

"She happened." The God of Mischief leveled an accusatory stare at Darcy before going for the coffee. Darcy started to protest, but noticed the expression on Thor's face. He was staring at her in surprise and with entirely too much credulity. She gave him a wicked, self-satisfied smirk. "Like I said, 'Just barely.'"

Thor watched as his brother opened the fridge and extracted an apple and two oranges from the vegetable bin. "I don't understand," he said.

Loki sat heavily at Darcy's side, casting a wary and wounded glance her way. "You never understand," he said to Thor, mournfully. He gulped several swallows of hot coffee and started to peel an orange. Poor Thor's eyes moved between the two of them, obviously bewildered.

She reached for her coffee and Loki flinched as if expecting a blow. Thor's expression grew even more alarmed and Darcy chomped on her tongue to keep from laughing. This was too easy.

Jane, however, wasn't fooled. "Flatten any cities? Enslave minds?" She directed the questions at Loki. Turning to Thor, she said, "He gets raccoon-eyed when he manipulates magic through inefficient pathways." She squeezed Thor's upper arm. "You know that."

Realization dawned on his face, and he smiled grudgingly at his trickster brother. "What transpired last night?" he asked Darcy. Obviously, he wasn't expecting truth from Loki.

"You're up, Silvertongue," said Darcy. "Sing."

She eyed the peeled orange and Loki dropped a wedge by her cereal bowl, forestalling her usual theft. "The one responsible for the deaths of the guards came near the house last night," he said. His face was calm as a lake on a windless day, which Darcy decided was Loki for "I'm telling the truth, but inside I'm seething about something."

"How near?" asked Jane. Thor sat rigid in his chair, looking like he was about to summon Mjölnir.

"Near, but not so as to be within my reach," said Loki, bitterness seeping into his words, though his face maintained eerie detachment.

Darcy ate the orange wedge as little tremors of nerves fluttered up and down her spine. Every morning, when she stepped out onto the porch for her morning bike ride, she faced the memory of Andy's lifeless body alone. Every morning, she turned her face to the warm desert sun, feeling the heat on her skin, and let the daylight banish her fear. The ugly reality that the killer had once again come so close to the house, brought that fear back to the surface. "So you know who did it, then?" she said.

"No." More acrimony leached into his voice. "This person has no small facility with magic and used it well to hide his or her identity."

"Is that your way of saying the killer is powerful?" Darcy asked, the idea sending cold creeping up her back. It was also probably the source of his anger. He wasn't expecting to encounter someone who could match him in sorcery. At least, not in a place like New Mexico.

"Yes," he replied.

"Is this person even human?" asked Jane.

Loki halved the orange with a jab and flick of his thumb. Dropping one half to the table, he eyed the other as if he didn't know what it was. "Doubtful. Some humans can wield magic, but they are limited by their lifespan. It takes centuries to achieve any real mastery."

"And this mysterious being," said Thor, "it approached the house? You sensed it?"

"Yes." His fingers nimbly peeled one wedge away from the orange half and he ate it. Then he set the rest by Darcy's hand.

She gave it back, saying quietly, "Eat it. You need it more than I do." From what she understood, he could go for a long time without eating, but everything, even supervillains, ran better with fuel.

He didn't seem to notice, his face turned toward the front door. "Sometime around three in the morning, I felt the touch of inquisitive magic, like tentacles reaching through the spaces within spaces, slipping past the barrier created by the device. It was driven by frustration and malice, but without purpose. It was like a child in the midst of tantrum, no longer even aware of what angered it in the first place.

"I went out into the night to meet it, but it fled, beyond my bond to Thor." He shot his not-brother a dark glance.

"You should have awoken me. Together we could have faced this foe, brought it to justice," said Thor, his voice strong and carrying some recrimination.

"There will be no justice for this being, only death," Loki said, practically spitting the words. "And there was no sense in calling you, Thor. What if it was a ruse to draw us from the house, away from Darcy and Jane?"

Thor nodded, grimly conceded the point. "You should have called me, nonetheless. I am not such a fool that I would not have seen your reasoning. You need not face this enemy alone."

Loki scowled at Thor, and Darcy asked, in part, to keep the two from bickering, "You tried to catch this person with magic, right?"

"Out of habit, I used the ploy that was once effortless: projections." His face was icy calm. "My adversary had the means of erecting barriers to my attempts and I still haven't found a manner of casting projections that doesn't tire me unnecessarily."

His frustration made her hurt inside. She pushed the orange half against his hand to get his attention. "But this person, thing, whatever, it ran away. It's powerful, but it still didn't want to fuck with you." His gaze moved from the orange to her face. "It had you alone, out in the open. You were like a big target, but it didn't take a shot."

"You should not have gone alone," grumbled Thor, but Loki kept his eyes locked with Darcy's.

"There was one more thing," Loki said. "An oddity." She crooked her eyebrows up, questioning and he explained. "The entity seemed to recognize me, knew who I was, and yet, I did not feel the expected hatred. There was malice, but the emotion wasn't directed at me, specifically. In fact, it seemed more annoyed than angered by my presence."

"Perhaps," said Thor, with a pointed look at Darcy, "It knows there are crueller ways to harm you than death."

Darcy squirmed, Thor's words making her uncomfortable. She also cringed inside, expecting a vicious denial of Thor's assumption from Loki. Something involving the words "stupid mortal girl." Thor and Loki held each other's stares, Loki's icy composure giving way to a turmoil of anger and loathing. He rose abruptly and vanished in a swirl of green.

She stared at the seat he had occupied, the awkward silence crowding her. Picking up her cup, she stood and said, "Coffee, anyone?"

Loki emerged grumpily from his room a few minutes later when it was time to head to work. The four left the house in the usual order, Thor first, then Jane. Loki started to follow, but rounded on Darcy right before the door. Seeing the expression on his face, the dangerous expressionless mask, she took a little step back. He matched the step and loomed over her. With the precise diction of an actor giving a monologue, he said, "I will not allow anyone, least of all an upstart magic user with pretensions to greatness, to harm you. Understood?"

"I know," she replied, because she believed him. His posture had none of the twitchy energy that meant honesty, but again, like when he'd said he couldn't hurt her, she knew this wasn't the kind of statement that he'd make if he didn't actually mean it.

He nodded curtly, turned on his heel and stomped out the door. She watched him go. "There goes my hero," she said to the almost empty house. Her knight in blackened, bloodied armor, with the face of an angel and soul of a demon.

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Sometime in the last week, SHIELD's IT department had decided that its employees were spending too much time posting cute cat pictures and not enough defending the world from wanna-be despots in garish costumes. The solution? Blocked access to all social media sites. Fortunately, shoe shopping was still a valid workplace diversion for those out to kick evil's ass and look good doing it. In lieu of Facebook, Darcy was browsing a site that sold designer boots at discount prices.

It was just her, Loki and Thor holding court in the Fish Bowl, since Jane was upstairs in the monthly principal investigators' meeting. Jane hated the meetings, since they rarely accomplished anything except to better disseminate gossip and innuendo.

The two princes were seated at the table, Thor raining hell on pigs in Angry Birds, while Loki, immersed in the latest dataset, did an amazingly good job of ignoring his brother's outbursts.

Thor's brow furrowed and his big fingers clenched the iPad. He was getting a handle on restraint

though, since just a month before he had snapped this pad's predecessor in two. "That one wretched pig," he grumbled. "It eludes me."

With a loud sigh, Loki lifted his attention from the papers before him and leaned slightly towards Thor. Brightening at his cantankerous sibling's interest, Thor shifted the pad so that Loki could see it better. The two princes' eyes met and Loki straightened with a scowling sneer.

He glanced around the room and caught Darcy watching him. His eyes met hers in the reflection. *Busted*. She smiled and did a little finger wave at reflection-Loki. She thought the hint of a smile moved his mouth, but he turned and said to Thor, exasperated, "Your fondness for explosives is your undoing. Take out the glass structures in the rear first, then weaken the wooden ramparts in the front. Only then, strike the TNT."

"But this bird only..." Thor's blue eyes narrowed and widened. "Ah, I see." He tapped and swiped enthusiastically on the screen. A few seconds later, he grinned and slapped Loki hard on the back. "Three stars!"

Loki winced, gave Darcy a look of utter misery and went back to studying the data before him.

When her stomach growled, out of habit she clicked on her email before she remembered that Sean was out of town. Her mouth twisted in a slight frown. First, even though he wasn't exactly loquacious, Sean had a slight snarky edge and she liked his company. Second, although Darcy credited herself with thick skin, Sean was well liked and served as a welcomed buffer between her and SHIELD's Loki haters' club. Her daily trek upstairs was always a little brighter with him.

Stalling, she went back to shopping. She was about to drop a cute pair of dark blue leather boots into her online shopping cart, when the new mail icon popped up on her desktop. As she clicked "Add to shopping cart," she noticed the sender's name: Sean, presumably sending the message from his phone. "Hey," the text said. "Miss me?"

"Truth?" she replied. "Totally."

"How are you? How's your pet supervillain?"

"I'm great. L's housetrained but he still chases cars, bites the mailman." She added, "Are you texting and driving?"

"No. I'm in SD now. I joined the modern age. Flew."

"No way. You?"

"Yes. I got felt up by a very large female TSA agent. At least, I think it was female."

"LOL. And how's your mom?"

Minutes went by and she got no answer. In the meantime, she gave the website her credit card and shipping info. The order processed and the confirmation page popped up. She went back to watching Loki in the Fish Bowl's glass walls. In the reflection, details became indistinct and some of his otherworldly characteristics less obvious. Real life Loki's face was always lined with bitterness, but his reflection looked much younger, all the hard edges rounded off. Either way, he was a black-haired, fair-skinned slice of yummy.

Licking her lips, she stared at his mirror alter-ego with fierce determination. *You're mine. Somehow. Even if I have to borrow Mjölnir from Thor, hit you over the head and drag you back to my room, cavewoman-style.*

Sean's reply finally appeared in her inbox. "Mom's not well. I need a distraction."

"You came to the right person. What can I do?"

"I was thinking. What if Mark King was killed by the same person who did Andy and Max?"

"That killer kills with ice, not bullets."

"But what if it's a trick? There was magic residue in the building. Edwards or King must've had some connection to the killer. Maybe somebody was trying to throw us, or SHIELD, off the trail."

"Or something." Icy fingers tickled her back as she thought of the murderer lurking in the darkness, just outside the house; Loki alone in the darkness with whatever it was. "L thinks the mastermind isn't human."

"Edwards and King are puppets?"

"Yeah. The baddy's Igors."

"Ha. I think the killer needs better minions."

"Dangerous work, low pay, no dental plan. Probably hard to hire skilled minions." Darcy darted a quick peek at Loki, wondering if he'd have accomplished more if he'd been pickier about his lackeys. His brainwashed help--Erik and Hawkeye--were brilliant, but the Chitauri collectively probably had the IQ of a houseplant.

"You always make me laugh." Another message quickly followed that one. "Thanks for being a friend." After they'd exchanged goodbyes, Darcy remained staring at the screen, heart heavy, wishing she could do something more to help Sean beyond being comic relief.

Meanwhile, the lab's reptilian comedian trotted up and paused, its little triangular head pointed at the computer screen. It occurred to her that the magical critter might be spying for Loki. "Hey. My boobs are over here," she said, but the lizard kept studying the screen.

She reached for it out of reflex, expecting her hand to pass through illusion. A half-squelched yelp escaped her mouth when her fingers closed on the lizard's tail. However Loki had put it together, there was real animal there. It felt like the tiny version of a boa constrictor that she had touched years ago at a petting zoo. The lizard's legs flailed frantically in the air as she lifted it, tail first, off the desk. Lizard in one hand, her purse in the other, she stood and went over to the table.

Loki and Thor watched her approach. "It has substance?" said Thor, surprised. Biting back a smile, Loki looked at his creation then up at Darcy.

"It better not poop, because I'm not doing potty patrol for a lizard." She parted her fingers and the small creature did a belly flop on the table before getting its feet under it. Lashing its little whip-like tail, the reptile turned its gaze on her, emanating indignation.

"The removal of reptile feces is a fitting task for an idle Prince of Asgard," said Loki, smirking at Thor and dropping his gaze to the iPad. Thor's face turned haughty.

"I'm making the lunch run," Darcy said, before Thor could speak. "You two play nice while I'm gone." She started for the door and then turned back to the two brothers, staring hard at the younger. "And, no. Provoking your big brother and getting your ass kicked will not get you out of going to Zozobra tonight."



"I am not wearing that."

Loki stood at the foot of his bed, arms crossed over his chest, looking regal and princely. He cast an imperious sideways glance at the thing on the bed.

"Really?" said Darcy, wearily. "We get this far and you're hung up on a baseball cap?" Sitting on Thor's bed, she looked him up and down. "This far" comprised a dark green Henley shirt, jeans and lace up black chukka boots. Perfectly ordinary clothing for a warm September evening in New Mexico. Without all the layers of leather, he was even lankier, but what he lost in mass, he made up in a self-possessed, graceful elegance. If he wasn't being such an ass, she'd climb him like Mt. Everest.

His sniffed. "Thor isn't expect to wear a...cap."

"Thor didn't remodel New York. Thor didn't do the monologue thing in Germany."

"We are not in New York or Germany."

"Point," she agreed. "But pictures of you have gotten around and you won't let me mess up your hair. We need to make you look less...you."

"No."

"Yes."

"No."

"Keep up the attitude and I'll make you wear a beanie with a propeller."

"You have no power over me." Angry joined arrogant on his lean face.

"I don't?" She put one hand over her left eye and jerked her head towards Thor and Jane's room where the two were getting dressed for the night's adventure.

Anger blazed from his green eyes, and with the dark shadows under his eyes, he took on the malevolent and unstable aspect of his recent supervillainy.

If she was Manhattan, she would be very afraid. If she had an ounce of common sense, she'd be wetting her pants. Darcy Lewis, however, wasn't a large metropolitan area and she was fresh out of a healthy sense of self preservation. Therefore, she wasn't taking any of his crap this afternoon.

"We had a deal, Mad Science."

He smirked evilly at her. "I could take your power of speech, so that you would not go telling tales to Thor."

She snorted. "Silent Darcy? Thor and Jane would totally know you hit me with some kind of mojo." A twinkle of amusement sparked in his eyes, but a muscle twitched in his jaw as he reined it in. A slight hint of overcooked cinnamon touched her nose.

Okay, new tack. "Fine. Stay." With a nonchalant shrug and a tilt of her head, she said, "Me and Jane will go and you can hang with Thor. If Jane won't leave the God of Thunder, Lightning and Fab Abs, I'll go alone." She rose and accentuated the last word with a pause and confident smile. "Either way, I'm having fun tonight." She turned and strode from his room, with extra wiggle in

her hips. "Tah."

Once out of his line of sight, her confident stride gave way to an angry stomp. In the living room, she rooted around on the couch and found the remote. Slumping on couch, she switched on the television. They had come home from work early, since the trip to Santa Fe took four and a half hours. Most of the TV stations were playing afternoon talk shows, with the likes of Dr. Phil giving their guests blindingly obvious advice. Alcoholic? Stop drinking. Kids demon spawn? Try discipline. And so on.

She stared at the screen without seeing or hearing. Even though her track record resembled Thor's--blunder into danger without thinking--she knew that going to Santa Fe and back, alone, in the dark, was a bad idea. She had made the drive many times before, often at night. But that was before an ice-magic-wielding psycho started stalking her. Peter Edwards, who may or may not be the killer's Renfield, was still running loose too.

In a war of words against an ancient trickster, Darcy didn't stand a chance, so she fell back on the oldest trick in the book--guilt. He promised to protect her. Fine. Then it was time he put aside a few of his issues (he had more than a magazine) and grew up. Else she might run off and do something really Darcy.

Click. She changed the station again, coming across a religious program where a slick televangelist was having a telethon for Jesus. Apparently, the Savior now accepted Mastercard, Visa and American Express. The preacher was reading the names of people who'd called in and pledged money. She was contemplating calling and making a pledge in the name of B. L. Zeebub when Jane and Thor emerged from their room.

Rather than his usual flannel, Thor wore a fitted red T-shirt, his muscles straining nicely against the crimson fabric. He immediately made for the kitchen to hunt for snacks. Jane started to join Darcy on the couch when the faint sound of an engine came from outside.

"It's Natasha," said Jane, looking out the window. "Where's Loki?"

Darcy joined Jane and saw the SHIELD agent exit a bright red RAV4. Heart sinking, her manipulation having failed, Darcy sighed and said, "He's not--"

"Oh, there he is," said Jane, her gaze lingering for a moment as she took in Loki's clothing, black cap and all. "Thor, you ready?"

Loki strode up to Darcy, his expression daring her to make a smart ass comment. Staring up at him, she eyed the cap and said, "I'm going to pay for that, aren't I?"

First he cast a jaundiced glance out the window toward Natasha who approached the front door and then up at the cap's brim. Next he smiled down at Darcy like a cat who'd just cornered an especially juicy mouse.

"Whatever," said the mouse, smiling back. "You'll have fun tonight, I promise."

## Chapter 17

### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Darcy liked Santa Fe even if it was trying too hard to be a quaint, 1800s-era, adobe village. Recent architectural standards had mandated that buildings be under a certain height and conform to a pueblo-style aesthetic. Which meant that strip malls, McDonalds and other businesses were still ugly, but in a uniform, tan, stuccoed kind of way. Santa Fe had two sides: the archetypal bits that tourists saw (the Plaza and Canyon Road with its kitschy galleries) and the rest, which aside from the southwestern architecture, was pretty much like any other sprawling western U.S. city. Even more so, at night when they arrived in the city in Jane's SUV.

Their destination was Ft. Marcy Park, but Darcy directed Jane to another park to the southwest where parking was free and traffic less of a problem. The gates for Zozobra had been open for a couple of hours, and a good-sized crowd already gathered in Ft. Marcy Park, a sense of impatience growing as the darkness deepened.

According to her friend Kelly, a native Santa Fean, the crowds had grown a little smaller as ticket prices rose over the years. Probably a good thing, since Loki's gaze scanned the milling masses, a mix of wariness and predatory interest in his eyes. *Less ants for him to fantasize about squishing*, she thought, hanging close at his side. The five settled into a spot toward the rear of the park to wait. Natasha and Jane were discussing travel in Europe - with Jane wishing she'd done more - but Darcy could tell that the agent was keeping a sharp eye on Loki.

The star of the attraction, Old Man Gloom himself, loomed above the grassy field on a low embankment. Supported by a wooden marionette frame, Zozobra was a gawky, tall paper construction, dressed in a dapper white suit, with black bow tie and sleeve cuffs, and curly-crazy purple hair. The puppet's lips were garish red and his lower jaw jutted from his face. Lit with spotlights, the giant puppet gleamed in white contrast to the black sky.

At long last, the event's master of ceremonies came out and the spectacle began. The burning of Zozobra was always preceded by the drama of little white glooms, played by children, who danced before Zozobra. A Spirit of Fire, dressed in brilliant red, emerged and did its best to chase the glooms away. This year, there were dancers, too, with flaming torches that whirled and spun, making bright arcs against the darkness. Throughout the prelude, the master of ceremonies cued the crowd and they responded with "Viva Las Fiestas," and eventually, "Burn him, burn him, burn him!" The crowd's tension vibrated through Darcy and she joined enthusiastically in the chant.

The crowd finally got their wish as fire sparked high in the puppet's shoulders, a dazzling spray of light that then started to coalesce into several hot conflagrations in Zozobra's papery form. The sky lit up behind the skinny epitome of misery as fireworks burst in the background, adding brilliant color to the almost black and white scene. Zozobra, being a disagreeable sort, didn't take his immolation quietly, instead flailing his skinny arms, wriggling in agony, lantern jaw opening and closing, anguished moans filling the warm night air.

"It is marvelous!" enthused Thor, reflected light from the fire picking out gold and copper highlights in his hair and making him look all the more godlike. Jane beamed at him; Darcy fought the urge to roll her eyes and lost the battle.

"It's ludicrous, a stupid superstition," grumbled Loki. Standing a pace behind Thor, he was shadowed by his brother, only an orange pinprick of light reflecting in his eyes.

Darcy snorted. "So says the *God* of Mischief."

As they watched, the flames rose around Zozobra, the pale puppet began to seem less like a puppet and more like an ethereal, undulating ghost, writhing in the flames, arms waving, moaning the loss of his corporeal form. Chunks of his body crumpled in a shimmering sprays of sparks and the flames blazed in fiery glory. Jane and Thor wrapped their arms around each other and were molded together by the fey light. Natasha stood apart from them, her focus on the giant burning puppet, red hair aflame in the light of the conflagration, looking like a goddess herself.

And for an odd moment, Darcy felt herself start to soar, made weightless by the feral energy of the crowd. Gasping for air, she fumbled and found Loki's hand. He made an attempt to pull away, but she held tight. After a moment, he relented, his hand tightening on hers. Grounded by his touch, she closed her eyes and let the fire's light dance behind her eyelids, and felt the boom of fireworks thunder in her bones.

She didn't know if she moved or if it had been him, but when she opened her eyes, Loki was right at her side, his tall frame against hers, their hands still bound together. Zozobra moaned one last anguished time, and then collapsed into hot, ashy oblivion, and for a moment she was sure anything was possible. Even Darcy and Loki.

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Darcy had made reservations at a Mexican restaurant a block away from the Santa Fe Plaza. To make it easier for pedestrians to reach the Plaza, the city had closed off several of the roads leading there to vehicle traffic, so the trip was an easy, five minute stroll. La Entrada Azul Restaurant was located in a rambling adobe building that had once been a home. The floors were red brick, the ceilings rather low with exposed round wood beams. There were stout kiva fireplaces in most of the rooms. The ambiance was rustic but the food always incredible. Darcy gave her name to the maitre' d and joined her friends in the corner of the restaurant's lobby.

Several other parties waited for a table in the restaurant's lobby. Three men stood nearby, laughing in that too-loud way that suggested they'd already done some warm-up drinking. Their voices had a distinct twang that said Texas. They looked like they were in their mid- to late-thirties and were dressed good-old-boy style, with Wrangler jeans, oversized belt buckles, cowboy boots and button up shirts. The shiny state of their boots indicated that they wouldn't know the back end of a horse from the front until it kicked them in the nuts.

Jane peeled away from Thor's side. "An Alibi," she said, happily heading for a short table that held a stack of papers. *The Alibi* was a free, weekly publication that had an eclectic mixture of news and editorials, focused largely on New Mexico. Jane's interest was the crossword puzzle in the back of the publication.

As she bent to pick up a copy, one of the faux-cowboys nudged his buddies. "Oh, yeah," he said, eyes on Jane's butt, "There's a pretty sight." Jane's head turned slightly in their direction, indicating she'd heard the comment, but she otherwise ignored the man and headed back to Thor.

Thor, however, wasn't amused. He strode over to the men, powerful frame emanating anger. Darcy cringed and cocked her head, half expecting to hear the rumble of thunder.

"Thor, no," Jane said, unhappily.

The three men stared belligerently at Thor, proving that alcohol really does cloud judgment. "You owe the lady an apology," said Thor.

Tex, as Darcy immediately dubbed him, was shorter than Thor. He had the build of a former football player, muscle converted to fat by inactivity and too many cheeseburgers. A little spark of nervousness flickered in his eyes, but surrounded by his friends, he couldn't do the smart thing and apologize. "You gonna make me?" he said stupidly. His pals flanked him like moronic bookends.

Darcy had a sinking feeling that this was going to turn into a cliché scene from an action movie, where every testosterone-poisoned idiot in the restaurant threw himself at Thor, even though the big man was obviously invincible, with a growing pile of bodies at his feet.

"And I thought *he'd* be the problem," said Natasha tonelessly, with a glance at Loki. Before things could get out of hand, she strode over and positioned herself between Thor and the idiots. She reached into her purse and pulled out a badge that she flashed at the men.

"Homeland Security," she explained, lowering the badge. She smiled and it wasn't a friendly expression. "You remind me of a Ukrainian terrorist who's on our watch list."

"Uke-what?" Tex laughed nervously and glanced at his buddies.

"Nikolai Pavlovich," she said. "Wanted for eight counts of terrorism, last seen in Arizona. He's highly adaptable, known for his flawless Texas accent."

"Yeah, well, I'm not him."

"Maybe. I'd assume he'd be smart enough not to pick a fight and make a scene in public. But maybe that's part of his, your game."

"I'm an American citizen-"

"Are you?" she said. "The more you keep talking, the less I believe you. With one call, I can have you detained, indefinitely, until I'm absolutely sure you aren't Pavlovich."

"I know my rights-"

"Thanks to the Patriot Act," she said, "you don't have any if you're a suspected foreign terrorist." The bully glared at Natasha, nodding his head in a twitchy angry way, but without anything to say. Against another male, even one like Thor, his macho impulse was to start a fight. Facing down a gorgeous redheaded woman whose calm gaze said, "Just give me a reason to make you bleed," probably short-circuited his brain.

"Let's go, Odinson," Natasha said, nodding her head back toward Darcy, Loki and Jane. Without waiting to see if he'd follow, she sauntered back.

"See," said Darcy to Natasha, "you *are* awesome."

The maitre' d called the name Adams, and Tex and his small posse slunk off toward the dining room. Five minutes later, Darcy and company were seated. Their table was in a room toward the back. "Ah, and there are Thor's new friends," observed Loki. Tex and his pals were seated in a booth, separated from a still disgruntled Thor by another table, where a family of four were digging into their dinner.

The waitress was a willowy blond with disproportionately large breasts. She introduced herself as Cheryl, explained the night's specials, and took their drink orders, her attention wandering frequently to Loki. When she returned with the drinks - two pitchers of beer, ordered by Thor, water for everyone and iced tea for Jane - she made a point of bending so that her cleavage was a few inches from Loki's face. He gave her a charming smile and she beamed.

Once she left, Darcy picked up the menu. "Funny," she said, "I don't see boobs on the menu."

"Alas, this clearly isn't a quality establishment," said Loki, pouring himself a beer.

Cheryl continued flirting with Loki when she took everyone's dinner orders and he, irritatingly, didn't seem to mind. When she asked what he wanted for dinner, he asked, smoothly, what she suggested. "The beef fajitas," Cheryl said, a little too breathlessly.

"Right," interrupted Darcy. "*We'll* have that, the fajitas for two." She tried to smile sweetly, hoping it distracted from the smoke that was probably coming out of her ears.

"Mine are real, by the way," grumbled Darcy under her breath, as soon as Cheryl left. Natasha was chatting with Jane, but Darcy knew the woman was aware of everything going on around her. "There's more silicon in Cheryl's chest than a computer chip plant." She downed most of her beer in a few gulps.

"Silicon?" Loki said, innocently.

"You know what I mean."

"You are jealous." He looked too pleased with himself.

"D'uh." No point in denying it. She reached for a tortilla chip and dipped it in the salsa. Beer on an empty stomach was making her head spin.

Cheryl may have gotten the hint, because she was a little more subdued when she arrived with the meals, though she still gave Loki sideways glances. Thor had a combo plate; Natasha, chile rellenos, northern New Mexico style, stuffed with pork, not cheese. Jane had green chile enchiladas, because that was all she ever ordered at Mexican restaurants. Loki, of course, sniffed suspiciously at the fajitas, even though the steak strips were steaming, giving off a delicious smoky aroma.

Darcy watched as he picked through the meat and the accompanying vegetables with a fork. "It's a good thing you're hotter than those fajitas, because you're like the lovechild of Sheldon Cooper and Raistlin Majere." She scooted the tortilla warmer closer, extracted a warm tortilla and loaded it with fajitas and grilled veggies. After a few bites, she said, "See. I'm alive. No poison. Eat." Still wary, Loki followed her lead.

"Is that cigarette smoke?" said Jane, lifting her head and sniffing.

"Thor's new best friend," said Natasha, pointing with her eyes at Tex and his companions. Tex leaned back in his seat and exhaled a cloud of smoke, a lit cigarette in his hand.

Alerted either by the smell or the complaints of other restaurant patrons, Cheryl approached the man's table, carrying a tray full of drinks. She gave the man a polite smile. Darcy couldn't hear the conversation, but she obviously told the guy to put out the cigarette. He waved his beefy hand, dismissing her, but to her credit, she stood her ground. His voice got louder as he started ranting about "freedom" and "nanny state" and "no tip." Cheryl didn't budge and finally, the jerk stubbed out the cigarette on the drink tray.

"What a prick," Darcy said loudly. "She should drop the drinks in his lap."

"I thought you were less than fond of the woman," said Loki.

"Less than fond of her tits in your face." The woman may have been an insufferable flirt, but she

didn't deserve the crap the man was shoveling. "The guy's an asshole. I was a waitress, uh, briefly, in college. I can relate." With her mouth, she didn't last long in the profession.

Loki looked at her slyly, then put his hand on her thigh. His touch burned through the beer in her bloodstream and she struggled to keep her cool. She glanced down and saw the little striped gray lab lizard sitting on his hand. With quick glance up at her, the reptile hopped off his hand and climbed down her leg and to the floor.

"What's it doing?" she whispered to Loki.

"Fulfilling the man's wish." He flipped open the tortilla warmer, extracted another tortilla, and began piling it with meat and vegetables.

"It's a genie lizard?" Darcy reached and did the same. A minute passed and the boorish man laughed and said something to his buddy, but didn't look like someone who'd rubbed any magic lamps. Something tickled her leg and she yelped.

"What's wrong?" asked Jane.

Darcy snatched up the lizard, which was back on her thigh and ogling her chest, and dropped it on the table. "Loki brought a pet."

Jane gasped. "You can't bring that into a restaurant."

"Midgard has an abundance of silly rules," observed Thor, grinning at the beast as it wandered across the table, investigating everyone's meals. "What can it hurt?"

"We're going to get kicked out," said Jane, sadly, staring at her plate. "And these are really great enchiladas."

"That would suck," said Darcy, cheerfully. "On the upside, maybe we won't have to pay the bill." Further commentary on the reptile was cut off by a startled yell from the nearby table.

Tex was doing a crazy chicken dance, making "Aaaaa!" sounds and flailing at the bottom of his right pants leg, then switching and swatting at the left. A plume of smoke rose from his jeans.

Darcy took a breath, smelling burned denim. "It's a fire lizard? Cool." The tiny striped dragon shot her a look that was quite smug. Thor, Jane and Natasha all turned their attention from the flaming tourist to the reptile on the table.

Thor, being Thor, smiled at his brother and turned back to watch the scene, a laugh booming from his mouth. Jane covered her eyes, mortified. No one else in the restaurant made a move to help the man, including Natasha, who gave him a disdainful glance and went back to her chile rellenos. Obviously, Avenger heroism was confined to saving the world, not entitled jackasses who didn't understand the words "No Smoking."

By now Tex's dance had gotten more frantic, his yelling a higher pitched, "Aaaiiiieee!" Darcy didn't see what he was screeching about since there were no visible flames. The waitress and a bus boy hurried over, the bus boy carrying a fire extinguisher. The young man fumbled with the extinguisher and a spray of white foam hit Tex square in the face. Thor's laughter grew louder. Jane ate her enchiladas faster, no doubt anticipating a rude exit from the restaurant at any moment.

The bus boy sorted out his aim and dosed Tex's legs, extinguishing the tiny conflagration. Thor turned around and grinned fondly at Loki. "Good work, brother."

"Are you just going to let him do that?" said Jane to Natasha, meaning Loki.

Natasha shrugged. "You have to admit, he's done worse." She lifted a forkful of relleno to her mouth. "And this is really great food."

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Tex and his buddies left the restaurant in a huff immediately after the incident. Even though it sat in plain sight on the table, no one else, including the waitress, noticed the lab lizard and Jane got to finish her enchiladas. When Darcy paid the bill, she left a generous tip to make up for whatever Cheryl lost at Tex's table. After all, the meal was on SHIELD's dime anyway.

After dinner the five wandered briefly through the Plaza on the way back to the vehicle. There were booths selling food scattered through the Plaza, the smells pleasant but not enticing since Darcy was quite full and a little drunk. The crowds had thinned, but she could still see tension in Loki's posture.

Darcy had her hand in Loki's again. Natasha hadn't failed to notice the handholding at Zozobra nor the fact that Darcy didn't relinquish his hand until they reached the restaurant. But Darcy decided she didn't care; half of SHIELD already thought she and Loki were lovers six months ago. Why not make rumors true?

They were in the shadow of a building's long porch, about to leave the Plaza when Darcy braced her feet, pulling him to a stop. "Wait! You aren't leaving the lab lizard here?" Jane, Thor and Natasha halted as well.

Loki looked down at her. "I'm not?"

"No." The Fish Bowl's unofficial mascot had wandered off sometime during dinner and not been seen since.

"It's a magical construct," he said, with a dismissive shrug

"It's *your* magical construct and all it knows is the Fish Bowl. You can't leave it in the Plaza, lost and alone. That's just mean."

Natasha crossed her arms over her chest. "Darcy has a point. You can't dump your Asgard pet here. It could fall into the wrong hands."

"Yeah," said Jane with a snort, "Another supervillain might use it as a cigarette lighter."

Even Natasha laughed at that.

"It's a mindless construct," insisted Loki.

"No, it's not. Call it back," said Darcy. Because she didn't want to prolong the argument, she added, obsequiously, "Your royal princeliness. Bow, scrape, bow, grovel."

"Your attitude improves, slowly," he said, dryly. He moved back to the wall of the adobe building, pulling Darcy with him. Positioning her directly in front of him, he inclined his head as if they were just two lovers snatching a moment away from the press of the crowd. She watched his elegant hands move, the motion highlighted by a faint green glow, and noted that he conveniently managed to brush against her breasts a few times.

"Now what?" she asked when he finished.



"We wait." The little creature must not have been far away, because a minute later movement caught her eye and there it was, halfway up the wall. Loki held out his arm and it hopped onto his hand.

He started to say something and then his eyes narrowed, slight humor melting away revealing fearsome intensity. Moving with startling speed, he pushed her back toward the wall and stood in front of her, attention hard on the Plaza and crowd beyond.

"What?" Natasha was suddenly just a few feet from him. Loki's back was to Darcy, but she could see him incline his head forward and then she smelled magic. The night was still warm, but a chill moved over her. The lizard, still on his arm, scrambled higher and leaped onto her arm. Its little claws prickled as it scurried up her shoulder to perch at the base of her neck.

"Loki?" Darcy said, "It's the killer. You sense him. Right?"

"Where?" said Natasha, her gaze now on the Plaza, demeanor cool as a cucumber, but eyes taking in everything. Thor's stance mirrored his brother's as he stood protectively in front of Jane.

Adrenaline spiked in her blood, lifting some of the drunken haze, exposing fear. Even with Loki so close, she felt vulnerable. Needing contact, she reached out and wrapped her hands around his arm.

Like in the lab, several days ago, power rushed into her, but she hung on grimly, determined not to let go and fall over. Startled by the surge of energy, the lizard clenched its tiny feet, claws biting through her shirt. Images flashed through her head like an old film, unsteady and crackling. She saw herself and her friends from several angles in the Plaza, groups of people moving around them, felt something reaching out from herself, feeling, searching. A hard shock of electrical energy bit her questing, evanescent fingers and then it was gone.

"Fuck," she said. "Was that him, her, it?" He didn't answer, but she knew she was right.

"Gone?" said Natasha. Loki finally acknowledged her with a terse nod.

"It was close?" said Thor.

"Not too close," replied Loki, "but it may have been shadowing us most of the evening. For an instant, it ventured too near, to the point where its shielding magic failed. Realizing it had been detected, it fled."

"It's getting bolder," said Natasha. She gave Loki a long look. "I wonder why?"

Hands still in a death grip on his arm, Darcy edged up to his side and saw him meet Natasha's stare. "A game?" he said. "Or perhaps it has decided that revenge isn't a dish best served cold, perhaps it's grown impatient."

"You all should be getting home," said Natasha, calmly. Darcy studied her, thinking, *Be like Natasha. Cool, calm, in control.* Her knees, however, didn't get the message and she hung onto Loki's arm all the way back to the car.

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They made it to Jane's SUV without any further incidents and were soon back on the highway, headed for home. After about thirty minutes, the adrenaline left her body, and her head, helped along with one too many glasses of beer, started to get swimmy. Her iPod, playing through the stereo, had hit a stretch of mellow songs and Darcy wondered if she should switch it to a livelier playlist for Jane's sake. The lab lizard had stationed itself on top of the headrest behind Thor's

head, and for once, wasn't staring at her breasts.

Jane and Thor were trading stories of parties from days gone by, and Darcy realized that drunk people, immortal or mortal, on Asgard or in grad school in unmagical Midgard, all pretty much did the same thing. Drink, throw up, fall down, in any order.

Thor's current story involved Fandral, Hogun, and a drinking game requiring a frog. Despite the promising premise, it wasn't any more interesting than Jane's previous story about a professor, an optical spectrometer and a bottle of Jose Cuervo. And besides, there hadn't been any mention of Loki.

Before she remembered that they had company - Natasha - Darcy sighed, loosened her seatbelt and flopped sideways onto Loki, her head on his shoulder. Just as she wiggled herself into comfortable snuggle against him, she realized her mistake. Staring at the back of front seat, she could feel Natasha's eyes on her. She closed her eyes, resigned. If all the hand holding hadn't indicted her, what would?

It seemed like a moot point, since he moved under her weight, pushing her aside with his opposite arm, and working the one nearest free. The sting of rejection started to burn in her chest, compounded by the fact that Natasha was witness, when his arm settled heavy on her shoulders and he pulled her against him. Inhaling, she smelled the cottony smell of new shirt, smoky fajitas and him.

In the landscape beyond, the rolling hills north of Santa Fe were dotted with the dark, lumpy shapes of piñon pines and juniper bushes. The only light came from other vehicles' head and tail lights and the almost full moon.

"Hey," she said, her voice low and she hoped, inaudible over Jane and Thor's patter, the rush of air over the SUV, and the radio. He bent his head to her. "Is the reason you won't have sex with me because I'm not a virgin, not pure?" Now that, she knew, was the booze talking. *Shut up, booze!*

His expression turned derisive, though without the usual cruelty. "Don't be ridiculous. There is no correlation between sexual experience and purity of heart. Some of the vilest beings in the nine realms have never ever known a lover's touch."

"So, uh, sex is good for the soul?" He smirked. "Then why not make me yours, and save me from myself...or something?" Wow. She was drunk.

"Perhaps," he said, "I'm trying to save you from myself."

"Oh, Loki," she said sadly. "That's-" He cut her off with a kiss. It was a comfortable, almost chaste kiss, like between two old lovers or a couple of teens who are just getting the hang of lip-on-lip action. And it went on too long considering their audience. But Darcy didn't care, her brain still muzzy with beer and body too happy in Loki's proximity. As he pulled away, she saw his attention move past her and across the seat. His eyes narrowed and he turned toward the window. She shut her eyes and set her cheek on his chest. Natasha would have plenty to report to Director Fury.

She woke up with a crick in her neck and to the sound of seatbelts being unsnapped. Looking up, she saw a black streak zip across the front porch: Inkblot fleeing as he sensed Thor's approach. She sat up, eyes Loki's shirt and hoping she hadn't done anything gross like drool in her sleep.

He gave her a polite nod and she watched him fondly as he exited the car, knowing he may have ruptured a vessel in his head putting up with so many people for that long. Once she climbed unsteadily out of the car, she went over to say bye and thank Natasha.

Thor was already ushering a weary Jane into the house, with Loki at their heels like an impatient dog. Natasha's attention, however, was on the home's grounds. Darcy had the impression she expected to find the killer hiding behind a sagebrush.

"Come on, admit it," she said to the agent. "You had fun."

Natasha nodded. "Can I have a word with you?" She nodded her toward the red RAV4.

"O-kay," said Darcy, unenthusiastically. She sniffed another lecture coming and it definitely didn't smell like chocolate. When they reached the little SUV, Darcy leaned against the front fender and crossed her arms over her chest. "This is where you warn me that Loki's dangerous and he's going to kill me."

Natasha positioned herself a couple of feet before Darcy. "No," she replied. "I don't think he will."

Darcy tilted her head and twisted her mouth wryly. "*You* don't think he will?"

Natasha focused on Darcy, her eyes filled with the kind of directness rare in most women or men for that matter. "I have no doubt he would kill Jane, or Thor, or...me, or any of the Avengers, with a shit-eating grin on his face, and then come home and get a good night's sleep."

"Your logic. I think it's broken."

"I strongly objected to the idea of moving Thor and Loki in with you two," said Natasha. "I, obviously, had met Loki and based on what I'd seen, thought it was a breathtakingly stupid idea to leave him here, with no controls, with two defenseless civilians. But Fury thought it was the last place anyone would look for those two, and he was convinced that Thor could control Loki."

"Loki hadn't been here five minutes before your mouth started shooting insults his way."

Darcy nodded. "My mouth is stuck in auto-fire mode."

"This time, it looked like it would get you into more trouble than you could handle," said Natasha. "I told Fury we should get Loki out of here before he tore you to pieces and there wasn't enough left of you to fill a shoebox."

Darcy gulped, suddenly sober.

"Except it didn't go that way, did it?" She smirked grimly. "You kept mouthing off, calling him names and what did he do?" She didn't wait for an answer. "He took it like your personal whipping boy. Still does."

"He threatened to turn me into a bug."

"He threatened Jane with much worse than that. And he meant it."

"Jane? She never said..." Darcy shut her mouth, remembering Jane's comment about Loki looking at her like he wanted to kill her.

"He didn't threaten Jane directly. He did share his twisted snuff fantasies with Thor." A nondescript white car cruised by and Natasha paused to watch it, expression disinterested, but eyes filled with the predatory intelligence of a lioness. "You do realize that Thor didn't threaten Loki to protect *you*. He didn't have to. And he knew it. Thor's not as stupid as Loki thinks. Thor knew the truth all along, too."

"Truth?"

"For some reason, Loki's always been soft on you. Maybe you remind him of an old girlfriend. Or his mother."

"Eew!" said Darcy. She considered Natasha's words. "If you're trying to warn me away from Loki, this doesn't seem like the right approach."

"I won't lie. I think he's evil and you could do much better. Given the opportunity, I would kill him."

Darcy pulled a section of her hair forward and turned it in the porch light, looking for the iridescent lowlights. "Your point isn't very pointy, because I'm not feeling it."

"You had planned on going to law school, correct?"

Darcy nodded. "Yeah, but then SHIELD went all Don Corleone and made me an offer I couldn't refuse."

"Because you met Thor of Asgard-"

"Met. Hit with a car. Tasered..."

"-and four of his friends, also from Asgard. With your history of speak first, think later, SHIELD couldn't have you running around, unsupervised."

"'Unsupervised?' What am I, three? What's next? Covers on the electrical outlets, so I don't electrocute myself?"

"Knowing what you know turned you into a liability to be managed."

Darcy huffed a sad laugh. "I've got a poli-sci degree. What I know about Asgard or astrophysics would fit on the head of a pin, with lots of room left over for dancing angels."

"Maybe, but to unfriendly governments or other enemies, you could still be seen as an asset." She turned her head and looked at the house. "Your relationship with Loki makes you both a liability and an asset."

Darcy gave her a "huh?" look and Natasha elaborated. "As Loki's girlfriend, you're leverage, a means of controlling him."

"Whoa. You're a hundred miles ahead of yourself with the 'girlfriend' word. It was just a few kisses-"

"A few? Including the one in the vehicle, just now?" Natasha's eyebrows rose.

"We're really just friends. That's all." *He thinks I'm unnerving.*

"Loki doesn't have many friends. Friend or lover, it doesn't matter. Whoever controls you, controls Loki."

"You make it sound like he has feelings for me, or something." As she spoke, Darcy knew she was fishing, trying to get Natasha's take on Loki's behavior.

Natasha, unfortunately, didn't take the bait. "What goes on in his head doesn't matter. What matters is what others believe is going on between you two. People will think they can get to Loki through

you."

"People, as in bad people?" Darcy could see where this was going, and admittedly, it was a kind of scary place.

"The good guys, too. SHIELD." Natasha's gaze moved upward and Darcy's followed, settling on the firefly-like flash of an aircraft flying low and to the south through the black sky. "If you ever hope to untangle yourself from SHIELD, hooking up with Loki isn't a smart plan."

The hair in the section magicked by Loki shimmered in the porch light, the colors, deep blue and green, washed out in the weak light. "That's good advice," admitted Darcy, "but..."

"It's too late?"

"It was too late on the day Loki and Thor walked through the door months ago." Darcy let go of her hair, and lifted her gaze to the sky where a bright streak flashed across the heavens and disappeared. *Make a wish. For what?* She looked at the SHIELD agent; smart, totally together Natasha. "You'd never fall for the wrong person, would you?"

Natasha's eyes sparkled and a sad smile turned up her mouth. She put a hand to her mouth, fingers touching her lips and shook her head. "No one is too smart for that mistake." If there was a story in that comment, Darcy wasn't getting it, because Natasha moved over to her car door, and slid the key into the lock. Darcy moved away from the vehicle.

"Just think about what I said, all right?" said Natasha, as she pulled open the little SUV's door.

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Darcy's plan was to do anything but think about it. She entered the house and marched toward the kitchen to distract herself by filling the coffee maker and setting the timer for tomorrow. Best prep the hangover treatment now.

Unfortunately, the tall, skinny reminder of what she wasn't going to think about stood by the kitchen counter, rinsing something out in the sink - the coffee filter.

When she realized what he was doing, she fished her cell phone out of her purse. "Loki doing something helpful in the kitchen. Must. Preserve. For. Posterity." Pointing the phone at him, she snapped a couple of photos.

He did the ignore thing and replaced the filter in the coffee maker. She sat at the kitchen table and watched as he measured out the coffee grounds and added them to the machine. He poked his index finger at the timer controls, resetting the start time to weekend mode. Since they couldn't possibly get back home from Zozobra before midnight, Darcy had convinced Jane to take Friday off.

Once he was done, he took an empty glass from the cabinet, filled it with tap water and sat across from her at the table. He set the glass before her.

"Do I look thirsty?"

"You look as though you've had one too many beers. If you wish to forestall excessive misery in the morning, re-hydrate now."

She took a few sips to appease him. "What about you? Drunk?"

"No." He answered her unspoken question. "Yes, I can get drunk. But it takes more than a few glasses of watered-down Midgard swill to do it."

Because he was right, she grudgingly gulped down the rest of the water. "Who says I'm drunk? Maybe I'm just balance impaired."

"Sober Darcy would never pursue the illogical line of reasoning that you expressed in the vehicle."

"Shit." She couldn't hide the blush burning her face. "As far as I know, you're no eunuch, and I'm not...hideous. A girl's gotta wonder." The one good thing about her stupid question was that she could rule out one problem. She wasn't ashamed of her sexual history, but if he had a fetish for virginal princess types, she was officially out of the running.

"Agent Romanoff is wise to warn you off me."

"Nope. You got it wrong." Darcy smirked, drunkenly. "She wasn't worried about me. The problem is I might break you and then you'll be no good to SHIELD and the supervillain army they're building."

His lip twitched with amused condescension, and he seemed prepared to say something snotty. His gaze took her in, and his demeanor changed, stare intensifying as if he was seeing her for the first time. Something moved in his expression, a dark and malevolent current flowing in his green eyes. Shifting in her seat, she faced him awkwardly, wondering if this was the same murderous expression he had leveled at Jane.

And then, as abruptly as it came, the dangerous mien was gone. His shoulders slumped, he sighed, and looked away, the only expression on his face now faint frustration.

Her sigh echoed his. "Night." She rose and headed for bed, dull and out-of-character misery suddenly sawing at her heart. The problem wasn't Loki's mood swings, but rather her conversation with Natasha, which refused to stay buried.

She had to hand it to Natasha. Her warning had been ten times more effective than the expected "He's evil incarnate, blah-blah-blah" speech. Darcy's own joking comment to Loki about a supervillain army unintentionally echoed Natasha's statement.

On reflection, Darcy realized that SHIELD no doubt suspected (or knew) that there were worse things in the universe than one petulant magical being with Daddy issues. And when some bigger bad showed up, it would be best to have all of Asgard, including the adopted son with mental health issues, on their side.

Admittedly, she liked the idea of seeing him in a more heroic light, but she didn't want him forced into the role. Because, barring acts of genocide, fratricide, patricide and other atrocities (like dyeing her laundry green), she thought Loki should be Loki. Besides, if SHIELD thought they could craft a tractable and predictable God of Mischief, they'd soon find their plans going up in mushroom cloud of green smoke.

But most importantly, if she was the leverage that SHIELD plied against him, he would come to resent, maybe hate her, and she couldn't bear that.

He joined her not long after she'd settled into bed. Snug against his side, her usual sexy thoughts were supplanted by the new, unpleasant reality. She had never thought too deeply about the consequences of involving herself with him, assuming the only issue would be other peoples' perceptions, which she could brush off easily enough. Darker complications, that she could be a

tool used against him, had never occurred to her.

He had to know, didn't he? A cunning mind like his had to recognize that any relationships, platonic or otherwise, could be exploited by his enemies. With the weight of his arm on her, his presence surrounding her, she felt so safe, but what if it was all part of an elaborate game? What if he was giving SHIELD an advantage, through her, to distract them from some other devious plan?

Her mind raced with a paranoia and insecurity that she hadn't felt in years and she cursed Natasha, all the while wondering if the agent hadn't given her the gift of truth.

# Chapter 18

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Darcy awoke, hot and panting like a Saint Bernard in the Sahara Desert. The clock said it was only 9:30 AM, but the late summer sun was already baking the house. Rolling onto her back, she contemplated the vent in the ceiling, thinking the air coming out wasn't as cool as it should be.

Squirming, she eyed the bedroom door. She had to pee and was trapped in bed. This morning her immortal protector was going with a new version of comatose. Instead of conquering every corner of the bed with his long arms and legs, he had her in a death grip, like a child with a favorite stuffed animal. She tried poking his eyeballs, but that just earned her a growl and his grip tightened like a boa constrictor.

"I really like you better when you're awake," she said, after escaping by slipping down and out of his arms and worming her way out from under the covers on the side of the bed.

Once she'd taken care of business in the bathroom and changed into shorts and a T-shirt, she followed her nose to the kitchen and the smell of fresh brewed coffee. She had the kitchen to herself, which wasn't unusual. Darcy wasn't much of a morning person, but fitting in a quick run or ride before work got her up before the rest of the household.

Normally, however, Jane would be up by eight, compelled by some scientific revelation that she got while dreaming and wanting to explore it further. But usually, Jane went to bed by nine, not one in the morning.

Darcy yawned. The action made her head pound faintly, but overall, she felt pretty good. She gulped down the rest of her coffee, strapped on her helmet and headed out the door for a bike ride.

Waves of heat were already starting to rise lazily off the asphalt, promising another hot day. The last rain, more that a week ago, had been the first and last in months. The landscape was so dry it practically crackled. She licked her lips, feeling like she was living in a food dehydrator under a cloudless blue sky.

A red van passed by and she watched it, thinking it looked familiar. Distracted, she let out a little scream when something erupted from a clump of sagebrush by the road. A leggy jackrabbit, startled out of hiding, bounded across the road and Darcy laughed at herself.

When she reached the Richards' place, she hit the brakes and hopped off the bike, steering it carefully around yellowy patches of grass heavy with sand burrs. Rocket and Meteor were already pressed against the iron gate, tails and butts wagging in ecstasy. Both dogs knew she carried treats, but Rocket shoved her fat white body against the metal bars, hoping to be petted as well.

A rescue from a fighting operation, Rocket had been consigned to bait dog when her sweet disposition made her too docile for fighting. Scars from other dogs' teeth showed up pinkly all along her rotund body. Darcy reached through the fence and scratched behind the tattered remains of the dog's right ear and marveled, as always, at Rocket's forgiving nature.

Meteor, adopted as a puppy and trauma-free, clambered over patient Rocket's back, whining and vying for attention. Darcy fed them both a few biscuits and then got on with her ride, the canines' chorus of barks following her down the road.

She remembered where she'd seen the van before when she passed the burn scar, where the red



vehicle was now parked. The whine of an electric saw and ka-chunk of an air nailer came from the barn. The exterior of the building was still the color of the hot dogs that Thor grilled a week before - coal black. (He'd been distracted by a football game.) All the activity seemed to be confined to the building's interior. "Weirdest remodel ever," she said and continued with the ride.

The ride, leisurely and meandering into town, ate up about 45 minutes and banished the hint of hangover that pinged in her head. Back home, she went into her room for her cell phone.

Without a Darcy to treat like a favorite stuffed toy, Loki was now sprawled all over the bed. The warm morning light gave his pale face a golden cast and brought out highlights in his bed-mussed black hair. Okay, so he wasn't too that bad asleep, either. She considered him for a moment, then walked over and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek.

Since her room was occupied, she went into his, where she spent some time calling and chatting with a few friends. It wasn't like she was going to spill SHIELD's deepest, darkest secrets, but she preferred a private conversation. Other than her room, Loki's was the only other that would be consistently bug free.

Though he was still unconscious when she returned to her room for a change of clothes, Loki had crept back to his own room when she returned from her shower.

It was well past eleven when Thor and Jane finally emerged, blinking like moles in the light and seeking caffeine and breakfast. Darcy sat on the couch, feet on the coffee table, alternately checking out male models in Esquire and using the magazine to fan herself in the growing heat.

"Is it just me or is it like an oven in here?" observed Jane, as she sat heavily on the loveseat, still wearing her pajamas, a T-shirt and matching shorts in a stars and solar system pattern.

"Lab lizard agrees." Darcy pointed at the television. The little creature straddled the top of the television, legs and skinny tail hanging over the edge, mouth open, panting.

Thor strode into the living room, coffee in hand, and stared defiantly up at the air vent, as if the malfunctioning cooler was an adversary to be conquered. "I will go up and investigate the matter."

"NO!" said Jane and Darcy together.

Surprised and a little hurt, Thor said, "Why not?"

"Two words," answered Darcy. "'Kitchen faucet.'"

"Don't forget the back door," added Jane.

"That was ugly," agreed Darcy. "Mjölnir is not for home repair."

Thor rubbed a hand over his beard and peered thoughtfully at the kitchen sink where a new, shiny faucet gleamed. "The faucet functions," he said, petulant.

"Dude, so did the *old* faucet." The only problem had been that the aerator screen on the end of the faucet needed to be removed and cleaned of debris. Thor, eager to make himself useful, had removed the aerator and somehow managed to break the faucet. Jane and Darcy ended up doing the new faucet installation themselves, because Thor's continued "help" resulted in the destruction of the p-trap under the sink.

"The back door was of poor quality," said Thor, obviously knowing what was coming next.

Jane put a hand over her mouth, trying to hide her smile. She chided him gently. "This whole house is poor quality, especially if your definition of poor is 'can't stand up to repeated blows from Mjölnir.'" The plan had been to replace the feeble door lock with a sturdy deadbolt. While removing the old lock and handle, Thor got impatient and whacked it with Mjölnir, with predictable breakage. Hello, entire new door.

"We can do this, can't we, Darcy?" Jane sat up and set her coffee on the table. "I've built complicated sensors from whatever I could find at Radio Shack—"

"-and we replaced a faucet and installed a new door," finished Darcy. "Girl power!" She didn't bother to note the obvious; that she and Sean had sort of blown up the only local heating and cooling repair business.

Jane hurried off to change out of her pajamas and Darcy went to get tools from the back room, and a baseball cap since the sun would be pounding down on the tin roof.

Thor made one last attempt to salvage his masculine pride before Jane and Darcy left the house. "It will be too hot on the roof. I should summon clouds."

"Can you do that?" asked Jane, "Without the lightning and thunder?"

Realizing that a roof wasn't the safest place to be where lightning was concerned, Thor looked crestfallen. "I don't know."

"Don't sweat it. We're good," said Darcy.

Down the hall, door hinges squeaked and seconds later, Loki wandered into the kitchen. As usual, he ignored everyone, instead opening the fridge and getting a beer. In place of his black Asgard garb, he wore blue jeans and a black T-shirt with an alien, flying saucer and the words Roswell, New Mexico on the front. He leaned back on the kitchen counter, flicked a finger at the bottle's top, sending it popping off and into the trash, and then took a long sip. The T-shirt wasn't fitted, but it followed the contours of his lean and very male form: broad shoulders that tapered to narrow hips, long legs. *Oh, hello, sexy.*

"Isn't it a little early for that?" said Darcy to distract herself from the X-rated supervillain movie that played in her mind (In it, Loki was doing the male stripper thing, just for her).

"There's a Midgard saying...'It's five o'clock, somewhere.'"

Thor laughed appreciatively.

"And it is hot," Loki observed. "I take the cooling system has somehow failed."

Pushing her baseball cap lower on her head, Darcy said, "Jane and I are on it." Jane nodded and started for the door.

"Wait!" Thor looked imploringly at Loki. "You repaired the cooling device at the lab. Couldn't you-?"

"The HVAC system at the lab is computerized and my magic works best with complex electronic technology."

"In other words, what Thor would break with brawn, he'd break with brains," said Darcy. "We've got this. Really."

Thor looked pouty, but Loki shrugged and took another long drink of beer. His gaze moved over Darcy, stopping on her legs. "I believe," he said with a pointed look at Thor, "it is Midgard custom for men, not women, to do mechanical repair and similar tasks."

*Sexy and sexist.* "This is the twenty-first century. A vagina doesn't mean 'no mechanical skills,'" noted Darcy. "Jane's got a PhD and I've got...three screwdrivers and pliers."

With a lift of a dark eyebrow and tilt of his head, he conceded her point. "Nevertheless, shouldn't the person with the power of flight be the one to scrabble about on the roof?"

In the end, everyone except Loki ended up on the roof, fiddling with the reluctant swamp cooler. Loki retreated to his lair to read a book, although Darcy caught him watching them from time to time. Thor was given the important job of handing tools to Jane and Darcy when needed.

The problem turned out to be the spider, a plastic device that distributed water to the cooler's straw pads. Its little tubes had become clogged with deposits from the hard water.

Ten minutes later Jane and Darcy were in Western Feed and Supply, which also doubled as a hardware store. The place didn't have the fancy displays of kitchen and bath remodels seen in big hardware stores, but the two rows in back carried a good selection of electrical and plumbing parts for everyday repairs.

At the front counter, Phillip, one of the sales staff, was ringing up a sale for an older woman with iron gray hair pulled into a pony tail. He greeted Darcy and Jane cheerfully. The woman gave them a long stare. When Darcy looked back, she saw the woman lean toward Phillip and say something in a low tone of voice.

They walked past shelves stocked with horse wormers, fly repellent and farrier tools, chicken feed and cages full of peeping-cheeping baby chicks. A Native American man, who was picking through a display of gopher traps, gave them a polite nod. In the hardware aisle, however, a young couple gave them tight smiles and exchanged a meaningful look with each other, before picking up a can of plumber's putty and hurrying away.

Using the old spider as a guide, Darcy and Jane found a replacement and went to pay for the part. Phillip looked like he belonged on a farm somewhere, lifting huge hay bales with a - Ping! - twinkle in his smile. He was at least six feet tall, with short strawberry blond hair and probably descended from the kind of Viking ancestors who worshiped Thor and company. "Credit or debit?" he asked, demeanor friendly, but when Darcy met his eyes, she had the feeling he was scrutinizing her, looking for something.

"That was strange," said Jane. "Did you feel, like, a weird vibe, directed at us?"

"Yeah. Did we grow horns and demon tails?" said Darcy. She paused, key in the car door, and studied her reflection in the window glass. Same old Darcy. Long hair, glasses, a baseball cap. Frowning, she looked at her knees, which still had a few scabs and pink scars from her two falls. The bruises on her hip, now a faint yellow, were at least hidden by her shorts. Yeah, she did look like her nephew after a fall from playground equipment, but that didn't explain the evil eyes that she and Jane got.

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Replacing the spider took just a few minutes. Darcy and Jane watched Thor fasten the metal panels on the swamp cooler, each cringing every time he twisted the screwdriver.

"Thank you, Thor," said Jane when he was done. Darcy, however, just puffed out a sigh of relief, her gaze wandering to the airplane cabin. A familiar flutter started in her stomach and spread through her as she met Loki's eyes.

The low grumble of an engine and crunch of tires moving from asphalt to gravel pulled their attention away from each other. Darcy's quiet euphoria was replaced with a hollow sense of dread.

The black SUV rolled onto the property and parked at an angle, directly behind Jane's SUV and Darcy's car. Seeing the vehicle, Thor hopped off the roof and held the ladder steady as Jane and Darcy made their way down. Director Fury and the two guards, Terrance and Miguel, were standing just a few feet away, their faces inscrutable.

"Now what?" muttered Jane under her breath. Darcy shot a glance in Loki's direction, finding him striding toward them.

"Who did I kill this time?" he said as he approached.

Fury turned and did a double take at Loki in ordinary Midgard clothing. "A rancher named Arnold King."

"Ah, apparently I've grown tired of slaughtering SHIELD's finest and gone for easier prey." He turned to Darcy. "Has life in the desert made me lazy? What became of my great aspirations?"

She rolled her eyes. "Not funny, Mad Science." *King? Coincidence?*

"I know that name," said Thor. "Is he not the one who was killed several days ago?"

"That was Mark King," said Fury. "Arnold was his older brother."

Creeping dread started to twist Darcy's stomach into sausage links. "Frozen?" she said.

"Uh-huh." Fury's full attention was on Darcy. "It gets better," he said sarcastically. "Wednesday night, just a few minutes before Izzy's Diner is about to close, Arnold King shows up, drunk. He tells a story about how you and Sean broke into Edwards Heating and Cooling and killed his brother, then blew up the place to hide the evidence."

Thor's laugh and sneer combo had a lot of Loki in it. "So? The man is obviously a lunatic and a drunkard."

"And now he's dead," stated Fury. "This morning Arnold King's wife goes out to feed the horses and finds her husband frozen solid in the barn."

"My brother did not kill this man." Thor's posture tensed. "He was in the city of Santa Fe, within my sight, most of the night. Ask Natasha."

A hot breeze skittered through the sagebrush, pushing Darcy's hair in her face. Shoving it back and behind her ear, she glanced at Loki, who was scowling at Fury and the guards as if they were a suspicious brown smudge in the bathroom.

Oddly, neither the guards nor Fury were paying Loki any attention, their eyes fixed on Darcy instead. Somewhere dogs barked; Rocket and Meteor, probably welcoming their master home judging by their high pitched yelps. Across the road, something moved, a roadrunner, hunting for lizards, its profile low and sneaky. But Darcy felt distant, the sounds around her muffled, everyone's focus closing in a tight bubble on her.

"You don't really think Sean and I killed Mark King? Or his brother?" She didn't get to see the expression on Fury's face because at that moment her view was blocked, first by Loki's back, then Thor's. Jane moved close to her side.

"Why aren't you harassing the boy," snarled Loki, "if he is an alleged accomplice in the crime?"

"Darcy has harmed no one," said Thor at the same time. "She and her friend were nearly slain by the madman's explosive device."

"Arnold King didn't just claim that Darcy and Sean were at the site," responded Fury. "He had photos, taken with a cell phone, of the two going into the building. And running out a few minutes later. He showed them to Esther and the others in the diner."

Jane squeezed Darcy's hand and craned her neck around Thor. "Why didn't he call the cops when he saw Darcy and Sean going into the building? Something sounds fishy."

Loki said nothing, but his posture was belligerent, and Darcy thought she smelled a faint whiff of burned cinnamon. The two princes' protective stances warmed her heart and at the same time filled her with a dark dread.

Director Fury and the guards were overmatched against one Asgardian; the two actually united could turn the trio of mortals into bloody confetti. Thor might pull his punches, but Loki had no compunctions about killing mortals. She swallowed, horrified at the idea of anyone getting killed over her.

Bracing for the shock of magic shooting through her skin, she latched onto Loki's bare forearm. It still felt like hot lava melting into her flesh. This time, she imagined her skin thickening, resisting some of the power and it didn't feel quite as bad. "Sean's got an alibi," she said. "He's in San Diego."

"So do you," said Jane. "You were with us most of the evening. And the rest..." Jane shut up, probably disinclined to mention that Loki could vouch for Darcy and vice versa because he was in her room.

Not that Fury couldn't read between the lines. Turning to Loki, he said, "Good thing you're immortal, because Ms. Lewis is the kind of woman who'll knock decades off a man's life." A faint glint of humor sparked in Loki's eyes.

Fury did the cyclopean glower thing at Darcy. "Thanks to you, I've had to spend most of my morning doing damage control and trying to convince the fine citizens of Puente Antiquo that you aren't a murder. I haven't even had my morning coffee, yet."

Darcy grinned crookedly. "Want some of ours? It's chocolately."

"I'm taking you and Jane into protective custody," Fury held up a hand, forestalling arguments, "*because* Thor is needed on Avenger business. The killer is getting bolder, nosing around even when Thor and Loki are here. With them gone, it's not safe for you two out here alone." Darcy opened her mouth to protest and Fury cut her off. "You can move back home when these two come back."

"Can't you just station a guard out here?" asked Darcy.

"We've already lost two good men to this prick," said Fury. Terrance and Miguel nodded grimly.

"Yeah, but, maybe this is the perfect time to catch him. You could hide more guards in the

neighborhood. We'd be like bait." As soon as Darcy spoke she knew it was a bad idea, but she wasn't a gopher. She wasn't made to live underground.

Fury, however, looked like he might actually consider the idea, but Thor spoke first, "No!" He smiled apologetically at Darcy. "I admire your bravery, Darcy, but it is too dangerous."

"But-" She shut her mouth and just stared at Thor, willing him to refuse to go, to say that he'd needed to stay home and protect Jane and her.

Except Thor was all about honor, band of brothers, blah-blah-blah. He'd never say no to his fellow Avengers. With a sigh, she slumped, defeated, eyes moving to her hands that were clenched like iron bands around Loki's arm. She let go, gave his arm an apologetic pat, and lifted her head to meet his eyes.

Caught watching her, he turned away and said to Fury. "This is Darcy and Jane's home. They are content here. If this is a ruse to force them to live in the compound permanently, my cooperation in Thor's Avenger adventures will end."

"You're not exactly cooperative, now," snapped Fury. "But you've got my guarantee, on the day you return, Jane and Darcy can come back home."

Feeling a little betrayed, Darcy look sadly up at Loki. "You too? Why?"

Their eyes locked and something softened in his eyes. He blinked slowly, green eyes abruptly turning cold, and stalked away. Even in jeans and a T-shirt he looked like an otherworldly being out to conquer the world. She watched him yank open the front door and vanish into the house.

"Who's going to feed Inkblot?" said Jane breaking the brief silence leveled by Loki's abrupt departure.

Despite her grim mood, Darcy grinned. Jane couldn't remember to pay the utility bills, but she always made sure the stray cat got his dinner. "Maybe we can come out on our lunch break and feed him. With guards?" She gave Fury a pointed look and he shrugged and nodded.

Fury gave Thor and Loki a few minutes to collect their things, which was mostly unnecessary since Thor traveled light and Loki, who could conjure a change of clothes out of the ether, lighter. Another security team was on its way to escort Jane and Darcy back to base.

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As they entered the house, Thor touched Darcy's arm. "May I have a word, Darcy?" He gestured toward the couch, his mannerisms almost courtly, as if he were dealing with some high and mighty princess and not a lowly science assistant.

He sat next to her. "I would speak with you regarding Loki."

*Uh-oh.* She felt a sinking feeling that had nothing to do with Thor's weight on the couch. *What do you bet,* she thought, *this lecture begins with, "You're a nice girl, Darcy, but Loki is a Prince of Asgard"?*

"You and Loki have become close," he stated.

"All we've done is kiss. No sex," she blurted, unable to keep the exasperation out of her voice.

Taken aback by her annoyed demeanor, he blinked, blue eyes clouded with confusion. "I know," he

said slowly. "He told me."

*He told you?* Her mind boggled at the idea that Loki was discussing their non-existent sex life with his brother.

Thor continued before she could ask him more. "I would ask a favor of you."

"K?"

"You are the only person he might pay any heed to." Thor bent, elbows on knees, a hint of frustration in his muscular frame. "Loki delights in antagonizing the Avengers."

"He doesn't just ignore them? Like he does everyone else?"

Thor nodded, but it wasn't a happy gesture. "He rarely speaks, though when he does, his words are cruel. The problem is his magical mischief. Equipment fails, or vanishes or transforms into something useless, like a teapot. People walk into invisible walls that appeared out of nowhere." His mouth twitched with poorly repressed humor and Darcy wondered which Avengers had smacked face first into said walls. "Footing becomes suddenly slick as ice or sticky as tar. His tricks grow in frequency as he regains his lost magical knowledge."

The front door opened and slapped shut as Jane headed out, fresh water and food for Inkblot in hand. Darcy gnawed on her lower lip. She could see where this conversation was headed, into a neighborhood close to the one visited by her talk with Natasha last night.

Was this how it started? With SHIELD, through Thor, asking her to nudge Loki in the right direction? "That's what he does," she said, with an exaggerated shrug, "he's Loki."

"If he only did this in training, it would be a small thing. But he endangers missions. He provokes." Thor smiled over his shoulder at Jane as she came back in the house and made for her room. "I fear for his safety," he said to Darcy.

"They can't hurt him. Much." She squeezed his powerful biceps. "He's not breakable, and 'sides, he's got you, right?"

"The magical bond between us," he said, "could be used against us, against Loki."

Darcy pressed her lips together, finding them dry. She needed some lip balm. "That can't happen. You're both too strong for-" Thor tilted his head, lifting his eyebrows. "Oh."

In her mind, the link between them was handy means of keeping Loki from wandering off and raising another army. She'd never thought of it as a weapon to be used against him. *Sort of how I never thought about SHIELD using me to control him. D'uh.*

"It really hurts him, bad, when you're separated?"

"I have never seen anything cause him so much pain, so quickly."

Darcy considered his words. This still seemed wrong, somehow, but she nodded, "Okay. I'll talk to him."

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Loki's door was closed in a way that screamed, "Keep out!" She raised her fist to knock and then lowered it. It wasn't fear that drove her reluctance. She just knew that he needed solitude like a

drug.

"Maybe we could get you your own iPad," said Jane from her room to Thor. "Darcy can probably charge it to SHIELD as some kind of expense."

"God of Thunder pacifier," muttered Darcy. She knocked on Loki's door. "Hey, I need to talk to you." She opened the door a crack, counted to ten and then strolled in confidently.

He was sitting on his bed, back to her, head bent as he tinkered with something. Once again in Asgard mode, he was dressed in layer upon layer of black leather. Bits of metal caught the afternoon sunlight, bright against the dark leather. He looked stunningly out of place in the drab room.

"And now you are doing Thor's bidding," he said, without looking up.

Darcy studied the thing in his hands, before answering. It was metal and vaguely insectoid, with little segmented brass legs. Can't lie to a liar, so she went with truth. "He's worried about you."

"I don't require his concern."

Reaching back, she gathered her hair and pulled it over her right shoulder. She combed through it with her fingers, idly searching for split ends. "What about my concern?"

His gaze lifted from the thing in his hands to the window. "That is not your place."

She drew in a breath for a sigh and held it. He was definitely in belligerent-ass mode and she knew it would be best to beat a hasty retreat. Her eyes lit on his slim fingers as they continued to twist little segments of the device in his hands. *You can be such a prick, but I don't want to see you hurt.*

"Yeah, so what *is* my place?" She clenched a chunk of brown hair in her fingers. "Waiting around in SHIELD's bunker, hoping *your* magic isn't writing checks your body can't cash?"

He eyed her, ice in his green eyes. "Your place is where ever you wish it to be, so long as it isn't playing messenger girl to Thor."

"Thor's not the boss of me. Neither are you, by the way. I'm here because I-" She stopped, hearing the words in her head, but unable to say them out loud.

She said the next thing on her mind. "Why not just play along, Loki? Blend. For while. Lull them into, um, complacency. At least until you figure a way out of the link between you and Thor?"

For a second, she thought she'd gotten through to him, as a dark smile quirked up the corners of his mouth. "Shouldn't you be urging me toward goodness, light, and all that, and not simply suggesting I bide time before my next bit of villainy?"

"How about more mischief, less villainy?" In the hallway, she could hear the clomp of Thor's steps as he and Jane walked toward the living room. "You won't get to do either if you're dead." She choked on the last word. "That bond between you and Thor is the one thing that can do that, right?"

"It isn't your concern," he said with an imperious sniff.

She rolled her eyes. "Do you like have a death wish?" Was that it? "I'm going to live like a mole for the next few days, partly because of you. The least you can do is not get your skinny ass kicked into the great beyond." She took a deep breath. "Just let the past go. Move on."



His face twisted, transformed from boyishly handsome, to sharp-edged, hollow-eyed fury. Still handsome, but scary. He set the device on the bed with unnerving calmness and rose. In a second, he was less than a step before her, looking every bit the hated villain, beautiful devil in black leather armor, raining white-hot rage down on her.

"What would you know of the past or of my pain? You've been alive but a heartbeat."

"Uh, that's long enough to know that you can't live in the past because it will eat you alive, make you...crazy."

"Ah, so it's better to be like you, pretending the past never existed, hiding like a coward from your pain," he replied, acridly.

His words had the sharp edge of truth, but they pinged off her emotional armor. Nonetheless, anger rose in her chest. "At least I don't let the past control me. Your 'pain,'" she made air quotes around the word, "owns you. You let it be the boss of you. It says, 'Jump!' and you ask, 'How high!'"

"You know nothing of me, nothing!"

The taste of magic saturated her skin, clogged and burned her throat like smoke. She knew she should shut up, but she was now too angry. "I know more than you know. Grow the fuck up, Loki."

"You have no right to speak to me in this manner." He snarled down at her. Without touching her, his powerful presence buffeted her with waves of anger. Her eyes stung; her fight response had conceded to flight five minutes ago, but she didn't move.

"You are nothing," he said, words dripping with contempt. "You are insignificant."

"I thought we were friends," was all she could say, because his last few words actually hurt, they ripped a little hole in her mental armor and a tight pain clenched in her heart.

"I am Loki of Asgard. I do not make friends with the likes of you!"

"Why? Because I can't smack you around and then hand you an army? Because I can't give you the twisted, fucked-up misery you crave?"

"Because you are a stu-" He stopped, a muscle in his jaw twitching, mouth an angry slash.

"Say it," she said, chin raised, defiant, but inside she was beginning to crumple. "Say. It. Say it, say it. Say it!" Tears started to bead in her eyes. "'Stupid girl, right?' He returned her glare, eyes glacial, not even a trace of humanity in his expression.

Taking a few steps back, she nodded. "You're right. I am stupid. For ever giving a shit about you." She started to go because a wall was turning to dust and giving way inside her. If she stayed much longer, it would fail completely and her few tears would become sobs, and no way was she giving him the satisfaction.

But she stopped, eyes on the wall, anywhere but on him. "You think we're less than you, insignificant and small. But you're no better. And you should be. You should be able to put aside the petty bullshit and live." She met his eyes one last time. "But instead you," she gestured vaguely, "all of you, Thor, Odin, all of you, just do drama and stupid on a humungous scale, for much, much longer."

Before she turned and bolted out the door, she said, "You should have the happiest endings of all,

but in the end, you ruin it. Just like us."

## Chapter 19

### CHAPTER NINETEEN

Thor phoned Jane every day and each time he made a point of asking Loki if he wanted to speak with Darcy.

Loki refused, in part because he found the phone a peculiar means of communication. He didn't want to chat with a disembodied voice; he wanted to talk to Darcy. But also, because he assumed she was still angry with him and besides, what would he say? "Having fun. Wish you were here," like some vapid Midgard postcard?

He most certainly wasn't having fun, and neither was Darcy given her living arrangements. His awareness that her state of pseudo-incarceration was indirectly because of him struck a single note of guilt inside him, which in turn, made him angry. Anger then triggered the memory of her face when he called her insignificant, when he almost called her stupid.

He saw with knife sharp clarity the instant when his words ripped through her. She was strong, stronger than anyone, including herself, ever gave her credit for. In the years to come, when she outgrew the bird-brained facade, she'd be formidable. But he'd easily found the chink in her armor and made her bleed. The note of guilt became a scale, chords, melody, and built a symphony of self-recrimination, heart rending and in a minor key.

Which made him angrier.

Why should he feel guilt over her silly emotions? She was nothing...

"Liar," he muttered, slumping in his seat against the vehicle's door, eyes seeing but not entirely registering the landscape outside the SUV as it maneuvered through the suburban outskirts of New Orleans.

"What?" Thor leaned toward him. "But it's the truth. Green Bay's quarterback fumbled and the 49ers recovered the ball."

Loki stared blankly at Thor. Apparently he and Steve Rogers, who sat next to Thor on the opposite side of the backseat, were discussing football. They were returning from what SHIELD had described as a minor suppressive mission. Rogers got the dubious honor of riding with Thor and Loki because he was too polite to object.

Thor and Rogers, it seemed, were currently bonding over American football.

"I wasn't talking to you," grumbled Loki. Steve glanced around the vehicle as if he expected to find someone else in the car. Concern moved across Thor's face. In his head, Loki laughed. The two twits believed he was hearing voices. Playing along might have been amusing, but he really wanted to be left alone. "I was merely speaking a thought aloud, a private matter."

The SUV slowed and halted at a stoplight. Movement caught his attention. A green minivan was stopped next to their vehicle and a young woman, blond hair, probably in her late twenties, stared out the window and right at him. He returned the stare, wondering if she could see him. The SHIELD vehicle's windows were nearly as black as the finish.

The woman smiled shyly and Loki shuddered. Most likely she was an ordinary mortal who saw a good looking man in the vehicle next to hers, but he had good reason to keep a low profile, even

among mortals.

He, of course, had no fear of ordinary mortals. There were other reasons, much more dangerous reasons, to keep a low profile, first and foremost the one that rhymed with...Thanos. What did rhyme with Thanos, anyway? As soon as the silly thought crossed his mind, he groaned. Out loud.

"Loki, what's wrong?" asked Thor, his broad face long with concern. Rogers stared at him as well, but wary, not worried.

Loki put his fingers to his forehead and muttered, "My head is infected."

Thor and Rogers stared at him, nervous and wide-eyed.

*Yes, lads. It's true. Loki's gone off sanity again. Flee for your lives!* Because the two fools' eyes were near leaping from their sockets and bouncing under the seats, he gave a dismissive wave. "A pointless jest." With a Loki-appropriate sneer, he turned away.

He had a term for the peculiar little notions, like rhyming the names of his enemies, that had plagued his mind of late. Darcyisms. The woman was like a virus. In his brain.

Viruses, however, usually only served to destroy and weaken the host. This one proliferated in his head, shoving aside the dulling, self-pitying miasma, and infesting him with a sense of purpose. For what, exactly, he didn't know yet. Nothing too terribly altruistic, of course. He was still, well...himself. Whatever the schemes, certainly plural, that grew in the womb of his mind, they were unlikely to feature quite as much violence as the previous. Something subtler, because, unfortunately, Darcy was likely to frown on anything involving the death of humans or other collateral damage. Even more unfortunately - infuriating, really - her opinion now mattered. Worse still, he couldn't bring himself to extricate her from his life.

If only he'd had the sense to kill her months ago...

With unwanted devotion, the memory visited him almost nightly as a dream.

*Odin's face, composed of broad strokes and familiar beard. Then, "Stupid boy..." and the rending of his memories.*

*Next blood. First a sharpness of flesh parting, followed by the warmth of blood flowing over skin. Then the bright exaltation of pain, a twisted release, a sweet evasion. They could try to make him feel, demand the recompense of guilt, but he'd give them nothing. Not even hate. Blood, slick and hot, then sticky and cold, then dry and stiff as armor. The bones in his hands might crack, but what did he care? Spells and once instinctive access to magic gone, he was naught but a shell.*

*Odin's visage was above him once more, blood on his big hands and thick fingers. "Loki, what have you done?"*

*Through cracked lips and bitten tongue, Loki snarled, "Everything. Same as you."*

*"No, Loki. What have you done? What have you done?"*

*Loki smirked and dove into the sanctuary of pain.*

His memories of the night he left Asgard, what little there was of them, began like the dream. A face loomed over him, broad and bearded. Odin. No, not Odin. His blasted son. The resemblance ate at Loki, sneaking past the fortress of pain. *Nothing like you. The truth was always before you. You should have known all along.*

"Be gone," he croaked, bent and twisted hands moving in the habit of a spell to banish the brute. He sat on the hard floor, pressed into a corner, with no recollection of how he got there.

"We have little time. Come, Loki." Thor's strong grasp found bruises and a gash on his arms, under his armor. Though he thought he was inured to pain, even delighted by it, he cried out.

"I am sorry, brother, but you must move. Now." Thor hauled him to his feet.

"What are you doing?" rasped Loki.

"We are leaving. You and I."

"Idiot." Magic not an option, he tried to brace his feet against the hard ground. "Take me from this place and Odin's magic-"

"I know about the spell," interrupted Thor. "It makes no difference. We go to Midgard." Thor hefted him easily into his arms, which was a good thing because something in Loki's left knee made an ominous crack.

He stopped resisting because he didn't have the strength and besides, in any minute, Hiemdall's gaze would fall on their escape and they'd be caught. Loki wondered what Odin would do with his golden son then.

They moved through the dark and secret pathways in Asgard's prison, past the cells of immortal prisoners long forgotten. Small things chittered in the wet, stony passages, some emanating tiny malevolent magiks of their own, but Thor and Loki slipped unbothered out into the night.

Loki lost consciousness, awaking to a long rattling equine snort. "Stand still, stupid lout," grumbled Thor, "else I will chop you into meat for Odin's ravens." The smell of horse and leather tack filled Loki's nose as he was lifted awkwardly into the saddle. He swayed but didn't fall because Thor leaped on the animal's back and wrapped an arm around his waist.

"It's a wonder you did not steal Sleipnir," Loki muttered. This animal, though extraordinarily large, had the usual complement of four hooves.

Thor chuckled. "I considered it. Then I realized it was the sort of foolhardy action that you have often chided me for."

Eyes moving up the animal's neck, Loki noticed their mount was one of Sif's favorites, an enormous, long-legged destrier with a curious blaze that ran up its face and onto one ear like a splash of white paint. Although the beast had a foul temper, Thor had probably chosen to "borrow" it because it had a remarkably smooth gaits. Loki passed out again.

When he awoke, they had ridden deep into the shadows of a forest, only starlight for illumination. Thor had both arms around him now, holding him in the saddle. Loki felt Thor's slight shift in the saddle as he halted the horse. Thor dismounted, and Loki slid gracelessly off and into Thor's grasp again.

His wounds ached, but not as much as before. Were they already healing? He needed their pain to keep worse things at bay. He pushed his magic, what power he could access, into his wounds and was rewarded by agony.

Thor walked through the forest for a time, the chirping night insects and rustle of things scurrying in the underbrush, their sole companions. Loki fought to stay conscious, struggling to determine their location, even though he knew the geography of Asgard as well as anyone.

His mind was like a house whose architecture had been utterly remade. He wandered through strange hallways into unfamiliar rooms filled with broken relics of a past he couldn't remember. Even if he were inclined to return and delve into the mysteries therein, he found himself lost, unable to return to the same place twice.

For a time even his short term memory was faltering and the details of their flight from Asgard and the month after, murky at best.

Which was a pity, because the exact means of their escape intrigued him. But the few enquiries he'd made of Thor, halfhearted attempts really, since to do otherwise would require a conversation with the buffoon, had been met with stubborn reticence.

That night, Thor tromped deeper and deeper into the forest, the trees growing closer together, the underbrush thicker. "So we're walking to Midgard, then?" Loki had muttered during a short spell of lucidity. "Fortunate that we are immortal, else we'd die of old age before we ever got there."

Thor chuckled, but offered no explanation. Hours passed, Loki spending most unconscious. At first, he thought the voices part of a dream. The absence of motion, Thor had stopped walking, brought him back to a state of not-quite consciousness.

"I am in your debt," Thor said. "We both are."

"Yes, you are," said a male voice. Loki blinked blearily and squinted in the direction of the voice, blind left eye sending lances of pain into his skull. There was a place between two trees where the darkness seemed blacker, but no other visible sign of the speaker.

There were gaping abysses in Loki's brain, but the habit of reaching out and exploring with magic so ingrained that he tried anyway. He could feel power inside him, but couldn't remember how to connect to it. Impotent fury thundered in his head, and he did the only thing he could; he shoved his rage into the wounds on his body, tearing at the scabs and tiny spots where flesh started to knit.

Someone was whimpering, a pathetic sound. Loki realized it was him and hoped neither Thor nor their mysterious companion had heard.

Unfortunately, the mysterious person had. "He's almost dead," said the voice. It sounded irritated, as if his impending demise was an inconvenience.

"He will recover," Thor responded, voice redolent with the usual noxious confidence.

"He can't do magic. For a sorcerer, that is death."

"His powers will return." Loki could hear and feel Thor's deep breath, as he struggled with his patience. "You said you could do this. Open a passage? Without the Bifrost? Beyond Heimdall's sight?"

"You've been out of his sight for the past five hours."

Something in the voice sounded wrong. As if the speaker was one thing (something familiar that he could not quite place), but spoke with the inflections of something else. He turned the problem around in his head, but the best he could come up with was, "Not Aesir."

But his truncated attention span reached its limit and he drifted, weak focus set on keeping his injuries from healing. There it stayed even when Thor's new friend neatly manipulated space-time and ushered them off to Midgard.

Disinterest was a good thing, because if he'd thought too much about it, their mysterious benefactor's obvious magical prowess would have triggered furious jealousy and Loki was committed to feeling nothing but pain.

Their passage didn't so much move them through space, but rather space moved through them. In the shattering silence of their journey, where light and sound and even a sense of self lost all meaning, Loki nonetheless felt a strange comfort. This he still knew, the enormous and simultaneously infinitesimal spaces inside space. It called to his magic and he felt a muted, but welcomed response in his being.

The world at the end of their journey struck at him, hard and gratingly loud after the sweet oblivion of nothingness. They were high on a wooded mountaintop where the freezing wind tore at trees whose only recourse was to rub their limbs together in creaky, squeaking protest. At ground level, the snow swirled in crazy eddies, ice cold flakes beating like tiny feet against his skin and armor. Forest litter under crusted snow broke noisily under Thor's heavy tread.

Thor exhaled a steaming gout of air into the frigid air. Loki could feel Thor's muscles tensing against the cold. Loki's response was something entirely different, a kind of welcoming that he always felt in this sort of environment. He'd once felt a measure of pride at his hardy nature. Now, it sickened him and he drove his revulsion into his injuries, agony rising again, a boon companion. Again, unbidden, a moan escaped his lips.

"All will be well, Loki," said Thor, clutching him tighter. "They will sense we are here, they will come."

"They" turned out to be SHIELD. They arrived in a blazing riot of floodlights, the head pounding chop-chop-chop of helicopter blades; they bristled with weapons and barked orders like petulant dogs. Loki pondered the possibility that his ever-noble brother had finally come to his senses and delivered him to a final deadly judgment with his enemies.

That was ridiculous, of course, since the pitiful mortals probably couldn't find the means to truly end him. And Thor, in true form, threw them both on SHIELD's mercy, all the while holding to two demands: first, that Loki not be harmed. And more importantly, that they not be parted. Thor hadn't yet seen the effects of Odin's binding, but he knew his sire well enough to recognize the danger in the enchantment.

Ordinarily, the very sight of Loki would likely have been enough for SHIELD's overeager foot soldiers to cheerfully unleash everything in their technological arsenal at him and Thor. By coincidence - interesting coincidence - Director Nick Fury - had been visiting that far flung outpost in the Sierra Nevadas, near the border between California and Nevada. Fury kept his human dogs at heel and Thor and Loki were brought into custody.

This didn't mean that SHIELD welcomed their errant, immortal Avenger back with open arms, particularly given the company he kept. Despite Thor essentially debasing himself by swearing all manner of fealty like a lowly knight, the business of what to do with him and Loki remained undecided for weeks. Thor devoted most of his time trying to coax Loki to eat and fretting over his wounds.

"If you would just-"

"I'm not taking off my armor, here, among these creatures."

Thor would sigh and then lay a big hand on Loki's face, eyes on his wounds, his blinded eye. "You should be nearly healed by now. Is this a function of the spell that binds us?"

Loki, of course, would not answer.

The week before they moved into the house in the desert, he and Thor were in yet another small cell, Loki on the bed, facing the gray wall. Every cell in his body throbbed in agony, all wounds, broken bones, so determined to heal despite his best efforts, now re-broken, raw and bleeding. Odin's spell *was* a masterpiece.

"I am sorry," Thor said for at least the tenth time. "It had to be done. We had to prove-"

"Shut up," whispered Loki.

The bedsprings protested Thor's weight as he sat down. White hot agony ripped through Loki's body as Thor rolled him onto his back. "Here. I was given some bandages. At least let me set the bones in your hands." Loki had neither the strength to resist, nor to endure the pain and he fell into darkness.

The maddening itch from layers of dried blood, welded to skin, undergarments and armor, woke him. Ignoring his body's protest, he pushed himself up to his elbows and shifted so his back was against the wall.

Thor sat on the other small bed, staring at the floor. "What if they plan to cast us out after all?" A rare note of desperation shaded his voice.

Loki studied Thor for a moment. It was good to see him wracked with self-doubt. His gaze dropped to his bandaged hands, which still throbbed. Thor, however, had done an admirable job of setting the bones right. Gratitude slid in over usual resentment.

"They won't," said Loki. "We are too great a prize"

At this, Thor brightened and Loki closed his eyes and fed his frustration into the splintered bones in his hands.

They left the facility in the desert, the place they would visit almost daily later, with an escort of guards, all vibrating with loathing. Loki smirked, enjoying their hatred, and limped along a corridor, supported by Thor.

"Say what?" he heard one of the guards mutter to a comrade. "They're moving them in with Jane, Darcy and Erik?"

"Not Erik, man," replied another. "He booked it out of town the minute these two showed up."

"So it's just Jane? And Darcy? Poor Darcy, what did she do to deserve this shit?"

Another guard, presumably higher ranking, snapped at the two men. "Zip it!"

Loki's mind reached instinctively for the names. Jane and Erik, he knew. The other, however, hung just out of grasp - one of Jane's associates? Someone of no consequence, although to Loki, the Loki that was, even the inconsequential could be put to use. But pondering the matter meant setting aside the focus on his self-flagellation, so within minutes, the name fell from his thoughts.

Walking through the corridors and out to the black vehicle cost him all his strength. In the vehicle's backseat, he leaned against Thor, helpless and barely lucid. Thor put an arm around him and for a few moments, the centuries fell away and they were again young and Loki safe at the side of his older brother.



His mind cleared and skittered back in horror at such maudlin sentimentality. Opening his eyes, he set his eyes for the first time on the barren landscape. This was their new home? A place painted in a palette of brown and tan, human hovels scattered about the landscape as though dropped by a great wind? The sooner he put his plan in place and escaped this torture, the better.

He shut his eyes and entertained a recurring fantasy where his fingers were wrapped around Jane Foster's neck, vessels bursting in the whites of her terrified eyes, as he choked the life from her body. His breath quickened, and groin tightened with exquisite blood lust. The fantasy ended marvelously with Thor doing what should have been done centuries ago, and killing him.

Jane opened the door when they reached the steps and Loki studied her openly, this woman who had so charmed Odin's spoiled son, she, in the flesh.

She struck him as nothing extraordinary, typical of Thor's tastes, an elegant beauty with expressive brown eyes that stared at Thor lovestruck. Interestingly, he thought he also detected a suggestion of irritation in her demeanor. Thor made some feeble jest and she laughed nervously. At least she didn't giggle. Had she tittered like one of the preening ladies of court, gazing adoringly at Thor, Loki might have flung himself at her, right then and there, and with his last strength, killed her.

They stood for a time in the shabby home's common area, making small talk, with Jane glancing worriedly toward a narrow hallway. "Oh, there's Darcy," she said as someone emerged from a room and made for them.

*Darcy? The name spoken by the guards?*

Darcy, it turned out, was a bespectacled girl who smiled warmly at Thor.

She wore close-fitting black pants, white leather shoes, and a long-sleeved, formless, hooded jacket that obscured the details of her body, though he had a sense of the ample breasts and the swell of hips beneath. He felt a faint stirring of heat in his groin, the remnants of arousal from murderous fantasy. Odd little white wires emerged from her ears and disappeared under her clothing. An ugly brimless hat, wool by the looks of it, covered her head. Her hair was long and a nice shade of deep brown. All in all, despite her hideous clothing, she was pretty little thing, with generous red lips and blue eyes.

Giving him a cursory glance, she addressed Thor. "*This* is Mr. Big Bad?"

"Lady Darcy Lewis, may I introduce my brother, Loki..." Thor glanced uncertainly at him, and Loki knew he was probably wondering which surname, Laufeyson or Odinson, to use. *Neither, you dolt. I have no father.*

The girl lifted her chin in a pugnacious manner, and eyed him with a mixture of revulsion and wry amusement. "And you brought him here...to die?"

"No," replied Thor, with overdone cheer, "his wounds look far worse than they are."

*Really, brother? Then perhaps you'd trade bodies with me for a time?*

"He looks like ground meat," replied the girl. "Wrap him in plastic and Styrofoam and sell him for \$2.99 a pound."

Loki glared at her, his gaze sketching a masterpiece of pain for her. She glared back, undaunted and he felt something uncoil within him. Realization. From this impudent chit, he immediately knew that he would always get the truth, not the pandering half-truths trafficked by Thor. But in the girl's defiance, she'd accomplished much more - transformed herself from prey to something

else. Prey never made eye contact; prey didn't stand its ground when it had room to flee. Nothing kept the girl in the room, a few feet away, but she remained, feet planted securely on the tan carpet, meeting his stare.

But his hate was all he had. He sneered and turned away, knowing as he did that he ceded her a victory. *Stupid girl. The sheep does not face the wolf.*

His own defiance was soon defeated by a broken body. His vision darkened and when he awoke again, consciousness a slippery thing, he was in Thor's arms. Choking on self-loathing, he kept his eyes closed.

The rumble of Thor's voice vibrated through him, Jane's voice in soft response. For a time, the girl said nothing and he wondered if she was as bored by the blather as he was. Pity that boredom wasn't lethal, that it might free him from this humiliation forever. He started to drift off when the girl spoke.

Then she was there, small fingers fumbling on the heavy bracer that protected his lower arm. She dropped his arm, none too gently, on his body, and hot agony shot up from his hand. Consciousness began to slip away. He forced his eyes open and studied the girl, a mixture of revulsion and fascination swimming through his fractured mind.

She assessed him coldly and then her expression changed, blue eyes widened, lips parting slightly and she looked afraid for the first time. Actually, she seemed to be on the cusp of some profound and dangerous discovery, but unwilling to acknowledge what lay clear before her.

*What an odd creature. Perhaps she's as mad as I am.* He closed his eyes.

Soon after, Jane sent the girl off to buy more bandages and medical supplies. "You don't bandage rotten meat," the girl complained, "You throw it out." Thor had responded with mild indignation, reminding her that Loki was a Prince of Asgard. Loki, however, almost smiled. The girl had a point.

As she stomped out the door, Loki heard her mutter, "Princess of Ass..."

Once, she would have paid for her insolence. She would have screamed until she could scream no more and then, somewhere beyond agony and death, screamed more. In the weeks to come, the lazy notion of wandering into her room one night and choking the impudent out of her surfaced in his mind, but never really took hold. What good would it do? Thor might kill him for the girl's murder. Then he'd be dead and Thor still happily with Jane.

Save for his goal of killing Jane and dying by Thor's hand, he had little interest in anything, loss of magic and memories leaving him with a heavy lassitude. Absent any mischief, he gave up and let himself heal.

After three weeks, by Midgard reckoning, the bones in his hands had knitted, the many cuts and gashes on his body scabbed and healing. During the day, the women went off to SHIELD's newest facility, a place he was eventually supposed to go to teach magic to Thor's mortal pet. *You may as well teach a pig to waltz, for all the use it would be.* For now, he was spared that indignity at least, until his injuries had healed fully.

All day, Thor wandered about the house and sometimes the grounds, anxious and bored. Boredom. The one thing Loki shared with the oaf.

One day, a weekend, which meant the women hadn't gone to work, he decided he was tired of

lurking alone in the room he shared with Thor. At this point, the fool was still making a show of returning to the room late at night having spent most of it with Jane. Loki didn't care one whit if Thor was tugging a mortal. He just wished Thor would stay with his whore all night.

The numbers on the clock on the dresser read "1:24." He eyed the device, the need to dismantle it and study its workings making his fingers itch. He got up and dressed - using what little magic remained to him - in simple Asgard garb, because he had no intention of playing at mortal. Pulling a book from the pile that Jane had brought him, *The Elegant Universe* by Brian Greene, he limped out to the living room.

Jane and Thor sat close together at the kitchen table, insipid smiles on their faces, looking at a publication that mortals called a magazine. His stomach lurched.

"Loki," said Thor cheerfully, obviously surprised. Loki ignored him, taking in the rest of the room. He moved toward the couch, thinking it looked like as good a place as any to sit.

Growing closer, he found the girl was stretched most its length, her head on the arm rest, a blanket covering her body. She was asleep. For an instant, the desire to limp back to his room took root. Then he remembered he was Loki and she was...he couldn't remember her name. Stupid mortal girl. Yes, that would do. He wasn't going to be intimidated by Stupid Mortal Girl.

Sitting on the far end of the couch, he started to read. It was going well enough until he felt pressure on his thigh. The girl's foot as she stretched, taking up more of the couch. He saw her eyelids flutter and she awoke. The foot's toes poked him, exploring and then she lifted her head and stared groggily at him. "It lives," she muttered, her head flopping heavily back on the arm rest.

"Move your foot," he commanded.

"Move yourself. I was here first," was her muffled reply.

He glared at her, the effect lost since her eyes were shut. "I thought beds were for sleeping."

"Mmmm. And sex, too," she said with a sleepy leer. Remembering the suggestion of ample breast under her clothing, he felt a mild twinge of lust and cursed himself.

"Shouldn't you be in your bed, not out here, in the common area?"

"Dude, it's past noon."

"So?"

"Only deadbeats and bums stay in bed past noon."

He stared across the room, feeling the wash of warmth from the heating vents. No, it wasn't Stupid Mortal Girl, it was Completely Insane Mortal Girl. "Move your foot, you are touching me."

"I don't have cooties. Much."

"Move your foot."

"Fuck off, Loony Tunes."

"Darcy," began Jane, "You really should - "

"Loki, Lady Darcy was there first," interrupted Thor.

They were all stark raving mad. He reached for magic and for a second thought it had abandoned him entirely. Then he grasped a thread and managed to gather a cluster of hot energy that he shoved at the offending appendage.

"Ow!" She pushed herself to her elbows, glaring daggers at him. "No magic!" And then she kicked him. Kicked *him*. Loki, formerly King of Asgard.

He grabbed her foot, feeling easy-to-break bones beneath his fingers. With just an easy twist, her ankle and most of the bones in her foot would shatter. He smiled, anticipating her agonized shriek.

"Hey. Let go. That's one of my favorite feet!"

"LOKI!" bellowed Thor.

She stared expectantly at him, dark eyebrows raised, blue eyes hard with anger. Behind him, he heard Thor rise from the chair. Her foot was small and warm and full of life in his hand. It would be so easy; break the bones as they'd been broken in his hand, leave her crippled because mortals didn't heal as his kind did.

But when she jerked her leg back, he let go and gave her a hate-filled glare. "What-ever," she said, and settled back down to sleep.

Minutes later, her feet were again pressed against his thigh and he ignored them. Well, not exactly ignored, as their touch burned against his awareness. Beyond Thor, when was the last time anyone had touched him with anything other than violence? There was no kindness in her touch, but perhaps that's what made it tolerable. Contact without any maudlin, cloying emotion.

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"Loki, are you well?" asked Thor, yanking him from his reverie. Loki blinked, noting that the vehicle had drifted from the suburban sameness to the edge of the Garden District, where SHIELD maintained a small command post in a stately manse on a quiet oak-lined street.

Without turning his head from the view, Loki glared at Thor out of the corner of his eyes. No, he wasn't well.

Compelled by his agreement to cooperate for Darcy's sake, he'd agreed to wear the black, leather pseudo-armor favored by SHIELD's operatives. In the interest of keeping the operation low-profile. The target was some evil genius, thaumaturge with delusions of megalomania who needed to be put down quickly and quietly. It seemed that by and large, the public took a dim view of loud explosive confrontations, even in the interest of "good."

The greater humiliation came when SHIELD, through Natasha, had asked him to quietly open the target's concrete bunker with magic. "No problem, right?" Natasha had said with a smirk. He couldn't, of course, admit otherwise.

By now, the stress of separating chunks of concrete and reinforcing rebar with magic had turned the whites of his eyes a spectacular shade of red. He was tired and would have liked nothing better than to find some dark corner and sleep peacefully for several hours. The one advantage of exhaustion was that it did wonders for banishing his nightmares.

Thor's concern, however, was asinine, since he'd seen him in far worse shape. "Peachy," Loki replied, mimicking Darcy, sarcasm and all, and giving in to his "infection."

Confused and nonplussed, Thor glanced at Rogers who shrugged and translated, "I think that

means he's okay."

Loki turned his attention to the window and watched a young couple walk with their dog down the sidewalk. He stiffened his shoulders in a way that Thor had to know meant he wanted to be left alone. The faint sound of Thor's sigh followed and for heartbeat Loki felt a twinge of guilt. He obliterated the stupid sentiment immediately, reminding himself that the dolt was the reason he was here, baggage to be dragged about on the golden prince's adventures. Asgard, Midgard, whatever the realm, nothing ever changed.

He sniffed, scowling at the chemical stench of new vehicle. His current predicament apparently required that he spend inordinate amounts of time traveling in the back seat of an SUV. At least, back in New Mexico, he had better company.

Longing rose in his heart, the emotion stunning in its sudden breadth. He missed her. Impudent, impertinent, infuriating mortal who thought she could tell him what to do. He glanced down at his clothing. She told him what to do and like a stupid mooncalf, he obeyed. An angry breath hissed out between his clenched teeth.

The weight of Thor's hand fell on his shoulder. "Loki?"

With a snarl, he shrugged off Thor's touch. "Unhand me, oaf."

"Brother, you are in pain," Thor persisted.

He rounded on Thor, rage throbbing in his blood, ready to vent his frustration on the fool. In the front seat, the driver, a SHIELD agent, eyed them in the rearview mirror. Rogers watched, posture stiff and alarmed. Idiot mortals watching the immortals' drama.

Loki wasn't giving them any more entertainment. With great effort he reined in his anger, although it fought him like a runaway horse. Thor's hand was back on his shoulder. Loki glared at it to no avail. "The pain will pass," he said. "I have no need of mothering."

Thor nodded, fingers tightening briefly on Loki's shoulder before moving away. Loki went back to his disinterested viewing of the passing houses. Beyond a mild headache, his overuse of magic had caused him no significant pain. His ridiculous attachment to Darcy, however, wrenched and twisted his psyche, leaving him feeling defenseless.

It had begun innocuously months ago, with her as a tiny spark that pricked at him, irritating because all he had wanted to do was slide away into sweet dark oblivion. And every time she provoked him, he unintentionally moved away from the darkness, turning his face to the light. Now six months later, he found himself once again in the world, new plots growing in his mind. Old resentments were still intact and he had no intention of giving them up, but he could see how they had weakened him, clouded his thinking.

He cast a sly glance Thor. There were other ways, much subtler ways to conquer his "brother's" precious Earth. The problem was that he could no longer frame his plans in any manner that did not include Darcy. Memories shattered, magic still recalcitrant, he remained broken and she had somehow slipped in, fitting herself to him like the missing piece of a puzzle. The exasperating woman was his friend, but the idea was more than a little bewildering since he couldn't remember a time when someone sought out his company without some ulterior motive.

Of course, none of this might have mattered if she had a face like a Chitauri. Pretty women were the norm in Asgard, and Darcy was ordinary by Aesir standards. But Loki wasn't given to attraction to homely women and Darcy was far from unattractive.

Initially, when he first found himself drawn to her, he assumed that it was merely the coincidence of geography. Quite simply, she was female and within his grasp. Of course, were that true, he would have already seduced her, long before she had ever shown the slightest whiff of interest in him. And certainly, once she offered herself, he would have used her, again and again.

In fact, he found his reluctance to bed her disturbing. He had never had legions of women swooning over him like Thor, but there were always those eager to lay with powerful men, and he had been the second in line of succession. His memories were clouded, but he knew it was unusual for him to go long without sex. Given the opportunity, he took it.

On reflection, he had to admit that with Darcy, he had the chance to feel more than a lover's hands upon him, but rather the touch of someone who truly cared for him. The notion was terrifying and exhilarating.

He knew he was lost on the day that the first SHIELD guard was murdered, when he saw her limp across the front porch, blue eyes haunted. In that instant, his world collapsed into nothing but the space that she and he occupied, and he was consumed by one thought: to find the person who caused her injury and flay them alive, one shrieking inch of skin at a time. That thought was supplanted by the need to keep Thor from helping her, to keep the oaf's hands off her.

He grimace at the memory, recognizing his insecurities in the reaction. Darcy often commented on Thor's good looks, and Loki had assumed, that like every other female who crossed the thunder god's path, she was smitten. In retrospect, he realized her observations were merely Darcy being Darcy, and not a sign of unrequited pining for Thor.

Instead, it was him, the man she called Mad Science, that held her interest. He allowed himself a slight smile.

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She'd captured his interest early, though largely as a convenient target for mischief.

"We're really letting him out of house looking like that?" Darcy had said the first time he and Thor accompanied her and Jane to work. She stared up at Loki, too boldly. He scowled. She responded with a smarmy smile.

"You mean the Asgard clothes?" Jane stopped before the door, digging in her purse, searching for keys or iPad or phone. "He won't wear anything else."

"I mean the hair. He looks like he's been attacked by a demonic Flowbee. 'Member that thing, from the infomercial when we were kids?"

Jane shot Loki a nervous glance and choked back a laugh. Thor asked, "What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Darcy, "Remind me not to get my hair done at Thor's salon."

"It isn't that bad," replied Thor, hurt.

That evening Loki wandered into the bathroom and surveyed Darcy's grooming supplies, his eyes lighting on her hair conditioner. Her comments on his hair didn't bother him; he was temporarily beyond much vanity. He was merely bored and in the mood for mischief. Unfortunately, he miscalculated something in the balance of red, green and blue light.

Of course, Darcy made a point of letting him know his mischief had backfired. "Check it out!" She stood in the hallway the next morning, blocking his path to the rest of the house, a big grin on her

face. Taking a chunk of her hair, she held it up so that it caught the morning sunlight that spilled in from the living room window. "Best dye job, ever."

The color, deepest indigo, was flattering on her, not that he'd admit it. "Move, or I will move you."

She ignored his command. "Have you seen Thor? Apparently he's been borrowing my hair conditioner."

"Thor?" The name escaped his lips before he could stop it.

"Lo-ki!" Thor emerged from Jane's room, Jane at his heels. She looked as though she were about to sprain the muscles in her face trying not to laugh. "Undo this magic, now." On Thor, the spell hadn't reacted as well and the golden prince's hair was a dreadful shade of puce that clashed terribly with his beard.

Loki made the mistake of turning back to Darcy, who was now laughing. "Move!" he snapped.

She let him pass, but said between laughs, "You smiled. I saw that."

In truth, though he imagined crueler torments, he never had the heart to do much to her beyond mild trickery. By April, his interest carried a measure of fondness (which, of course, annoyed him). Everyone tried to engage his attention, either through putrid kindness (Jane or Thor), or by trying to raise his ire (everyone else). Darcy did neither, instead simply treating him as she did everyone else, with a mixture of brutal honesty and humor.

He had first felt the ghost of attraction on a spring day, when the New Mexico sun began to reassert its fierce hold on the region. They were climbing out of Jane's SUV, Darcy still riding in the front seat with Jane, Loki in back with Thor. Darcy led the way to the house, key in hand.

"Awesome." She hurried up the steps and placed her hand, palm down on the white metal siding by the front door. There was a small twig from one of the native bushes hovering against the wall. As Loki approached, he saw it move and realized it was some sort of insect. The creature climbed slowly onto her hand and she held it up for Jane and Thor to see.

"Stickbug," she explained to Thor. "It's officially spring. No more cold."

Jane smiled. "That means spiders, too."

"Way to be a downer, Jane," Darcy said with a pout. Catching Loki watching her, she smirked. "It's skinny and green. The Loki of the insect world."

He almost responded with the observation that flies must be the Darcy equivalent. But at that point, he still dealt with everyone, including her, with silent scorn. Nevertheless, he waged a small battle with the slight smile that tried to take over his mouth. Though he'd lobbed the comparison at many, he was rather certain he'd never been compared to an insect before.

She stuck her tongue out at him and then unlocked the door. Jane and Thor entered the house and Loki made to follow, but paused to watch as Darcy walked down the stairs and to a gray clump of native bush. She extended her hand so that the insect could climb onto the plant. The creature, however, had decided that Darcy was a more pleasant habitat and refused to be moved. The sun picked out gold and reddish highlights in her hair, along with the few purple strands that remained. Her light jacket hid any view of her breasts, but the black tights she wore showed off shapely thighs. Loki pressed his lips together, a mild surge of lust building in his body.

"Oh come on, off!" Unaware of his scrutiny, she gently prodded the insect. "It's spaghetti night and

I'm starving." Underneath ordinary lust, another emotion grew, shortening his breaths. She suddenly pulled at him like a lodestone. He reached out and without thinking, gave the insect a magical nudge, sending it off her hand and to the bush.

She turned and met his stare. Embarrassed, though not sure why, he spun and stomped in the house, certain his peculiar feelings were Thor's fault. Everything was Thor's fault.

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At his side, Thor laughed and nudged him too hard with an elbow. "That is a good jest, isn't it, Loki?"

Loki scowled, wondering, not for the first time, if Frigga had dropped Thor on his head, repeatedly, as an infant. That would account for the thick skull absent any contents.

Of late, he had started to feel his grip on the idea that everything was Thor and Odin's fault slipping away (now, it was largely Odin's), but he still believed prolonged conversation with Thor ate away at his own intelligence.

Darcy didn't approve of his derision toward Thor and she'd quickly tired of his protests that they weren't brothers. On one occasion, though, she'd slipped and describe Thor as "not the brightest penny in the jar." Loki may have loved her for that alone.

The word love was insufficient, trite, a description of something fleeting and grounded in simple lust.

Every night he'd spent in her bed had featured the battle with his immediate impulse to take what she offered. But when he looked at her, he was hit by the powerful recognition that the connection between them ran deeper, that she would still hold his interest long after the initial novelty of skin on skin faded.

She knew what he had done and, as far as he could tell, hadn't forgotten, hadn't forgiven him for his crimes. Instead, she had, in what he now knew was her habit, set his past aside, and turned her focus on his present, which to be honest, wasn't that much better, though at least, absent murder and destruction. And that, seemed enough to stand at his side.

The SUV turned left at one street, then right on another. Thor and Rogers were now talking about fast food, with Thor enthusiastically extolling the virtues of a hot meal, served up in under five minutes and Rogers bemoaning the loss of patience in the American people, that quality and good customer service were sacrificed to haste. It was the most intelligent conversation they'd had thus far.

Loki remembered the night Fury and his men had come out to the house, under the auspices of justice, but really just playing a mummer's game. How Darcy had stood before Fury and his muscle-bound minions and made the case for his innocence. Until she'd spoken up, he hadn't much cared if the Director hauled him away, the idea sweetened by the anguish it would cause Thor and Jane.

When asked if he'd killed the guard, he'd considered cheerfully confessing to the crime he hadn't committed, just to see the horror on Thor's face. But he could feel her eyes on him, and the truth spilled from his lips, albeit cached in a bit of nastiness. She'd taken his side and in that instant he was compelled to follow through. Afterward, he had sniffed around the scene of the crime, feeling, for the first time in months, an interest in something.



The guards' deaths were of no consequence to him. And though it no doubt impressed the mortals, the manner of their murder was a relatively simple magical working. Initially, his interest was piqued by two things: Darcy's amusing quest for justice and, the peculiar familiarity of perpetrator's magical signature.

Until quite recently, Loki had assumed the murderer a minor dabbler in the arcane, no one to be taken terribly seriously. Now, recent events suggested otherwise and Loki chastened himself for complacency.

The vehicle slowed and turned into a narrow driveway. Ahead a metal garage door rose. From the outside, the garage appeared to be the standard two-car variety, but it led to a larger underground structure. Loki sneered, wondering at SHIELD's fondness for underground facilities, particularly in areas as flood prone as this one.

The SUV stopped and Rogers opened his door and jumped out. Thor looked at Loki expectantly, glancing down at the door handle. Loki, still lost in thought, didn't move. He ran his gaze over the familiar landscape of Thor's face, sifting through the rubble of his memories from the night they'd "escaped" from Asgard.

A disconcerting theory began to take form in his head.

## Chapter 20

### CHAPTER TWENTY

It amused Loki to no end that in the absence of a proper adversary - himself - the Avengers quickly disassembled into a disparate collection of egos and priorities. The main point of these foolish exercises was to remind the six that they were a team.

Of the lot, Thor and Rogers were the only ones who approached the matter as anything less than a chore. Romanoff and Barton made like dutiful soldiers, but both obviously were happier operating in more solitary framework. Stark and Banner, however, were making an art of crafting clever excuses for avoiding their so-called duty.

"One of these days," Steve Rogers had once observed, "Stark's going to go with the old 'The dog ate my homework' excuse."

This time, Banner had successfully excluded himself from the outing. Stark was present, but acting out worse than a sullen teenager, and in the process, made himself more a nuisance than Loki. Loki, his thoughts occupied by Darcy and the possible identity of the killer, had been almost grateful to have the focus shifted from him.

Having spent several days in training exercises, and then squashing the latest pitiful scoundrel who had more weapons and aspirations than brains, the Avengers would (Loki hoped) now be free to go back to whatever they did when not forced to play together like children. Now they headed into the house to wait for a debriefing.

Romanoff, wisely, had found some excuse to vanish as soon as they entered the building, but the rest waited in the dining room, scattered around a large mahogany table. Within minutes, Thor and Stark were showcasing their charisma, vying for the conversation's center of attention. Loki eyed them wearily, thinking that if SHIELD had truly wanted to defeat him quickly, they could have forced him to listen to these two blowhards for a few hours. He would have genuinely surrendered and cast aside all glorious plans.

With Thor occupied, Loki edged his chair back and started to sneak away.

"Thor says you and the ladies went to something called Zozobra," said a voice at his side. Loki turned to find that Rogers was the speaker. The man hated him as much as the others, but was always compelled by irritating politeness to try and engage Loki in conversation.

Loki cast him a world-weary look. Undeterred, the man continued. "You know what I'd like to see? The balloon festival. *Fiesta* is what they call it, right? Down in Albuquerque. Director Fury showed me some photos of it on the Internet. I bet it's amazing in person. Will you be going to that?"

To his annoyance, Loki almost pointed out that the event took place in the wee hours of the morning, and nothing, short of multi-megaton explosives, was getting him out of bed that early. (Darcy had already advanced the idea; he'd said no.) He lifted his gaze to the ceiling, wishing he could flee to the old airplane cabin, his "lair" where no one besides Darcy ever dared disturb his peace. Darcy, at least, had an intuitive sense for when he truly needed to be alone and unlike Thor, didn't take his need for solitude personally.

Before he did something appalling, like speak to Rogers, he got up and left the room. No one commented on his leaving which was rather disappointing because it meant they didn't think he

was up to any mischief. He wasn't, but he had a reputation to maintain.

He walked down a hallway, past a bedroom that had been modified into an office, beds and nightstands replaced with computers and other technical apparatus. The agents in the room gave him dark and wary stares, but said nothing. He considered cloaking himself in invisibility and poking around the house, but decided to use his power to snoop in other ways. His headache tightened as he cast a spell of detection throughout the building.

Just a few paces away, in a kitchen, he picked up a hidden passage. The kitchen, recently remodeled, smelled of fresh paint and new tile grout. The cabinetry was cream-colored and the refrigerator and stove, red enamel and modern, but made to look vintage. No one was around and he strode up to a pantry door and pulled it open. He glanced back in the dining room's direction, calculated the distance between him and Thor, and then went down the stairs that the open door revealed.

The room below was a kind of bunker, recently constructed and reeking of steel, titanium, rubber and plastic. The faint rectangular outline of a light switch on the wall could be seen in the weak light from the stairwell, but he paid it no attention. He liked the dark. Closing his eyes, he breathed deeply, the magic from the detection spell resonating in every cell of his body. It was a simple spell, but magic nonetheless, and coursed through him like a soothing balm. Alone. Finally.

His respite wasn't to last. A few minutes later, familiar heavy footfalls thudded above in the kitchen and then down the stairs. "Loki?"

Thor paused at the bottom of the stairs, squinting into the darkness. "You could at least make an attempt," he said.

"An attempt at what?" Loki knew what Thor meant, but, honestly, if the big lout insisted on being so stubbornly thick-headed...

"It wouldn't hurt you to feign a measure of politeness."

"They loath me, and I them." Loki smiled brightly. "The only one not happy with the arrangement is you."

"Steve is a good man," Thor observed. "It would not hurt to have one ally."

Loki restrained himself from rubbing his forehead. His headache tightened in a band around his skull. They'd had a variation of this conversation many times before. He favored Thor with a mirthless smile. "Thor, *brother*, I would be forever in your debt if you might located me a dwarf."

"A dwarf?"

"To sew my mouth shut, so that I might have a suitable excuse for not speaking to these cretins."

"Loki," said Thor unhappily. "To what purpose, pushing everyone away? Even...Darcy."

Loki grew very still. "She is a silly girl." He didn't trust himself to say anything more.

"She is your friend, Loki."

"I have no need of friends."

Thor sighed and Loki realized that if he had an American dollar for every time he'd heard that sound, he'd be the richest man on Earth. "We return to New Mexico today," Thor said before he

marched up the steps.

He watched Thor leave, but didn't move. Once Thor was out of sight, he turned his head slightly to the right and said, "Creeping about in the shadows, eavesdropping, despite its entertainment value, does tend to earn one a reputation as a sneak and a liar." He had not been aware of her presence until she gave herself away with an irritated sigh that mirrored his own when Thor arrived. The detection spell located hidden passages, not people.

"I'm a spy. It goes with the job description." Behind him, the shadows coalesced into Natasha. "Besides, I was here first. You and Thor barged in and put on your little drama."

Eyes once again on the doorway, he said, "I'm sorry. You weren't entertained?"

"Not a fan of reality TV." Her voice sounded closer, though he hadn't heard her move. "Thor's got it wrong, doesn't he?"

"Thor takes wrong to epic proportions," replied Loki, dryly.

"You're not Darcy's friend."

"I'm not?"

"Not unless friends stick their tongues in each other's mouths."

Loki shrugged. "They don't? I'm not familiar with all Midgard customs." He smirked over his shoulder at her. "You and Barton-?"

"Why'd you kiss her?"

"The first time?" Agent Romanoff knew full well why he had kissed Darcy on the way home from Zozobra. "She asked. It seemed the 'friendly' thing to do." He swept a long look over the walls before him, taking in the structural features. *Steel*, he thought vaguely, *The bane of elves but never a problem for my kind. Why not?* For some reason, the idea seemed mildly relevant to...something.

Behind him, he heard the faint sound of steel sliding through a leather holster, and the snick of a gun's safety. "Odd," he said. "I always thought defending a woman's honor fell to her father."

"I've read her file. Her parents don't give a shit." Her voice was even closer now. "Can bullets even kill your kind?"

"Thor? Unlikely. His skull is too thick." He looked down at his hands; quite recently a ruined mess, now whole and unscarred. "The high velocity rounds in your gun might penetrate mine, though." A spell came back to him, simple but lost until now. He moved his fingers, shaping the form and a bright globe of light lit the wall before him. "My brains, splattered like paint on the wall. That might do it."

"You'd let me do it." It was a statement, not a question.

"What I do for science," he said with exaggerated wistfulness.

He heard her huff of grim laughter. "Does she know?"

"Does she know what?" He turned and faced Natasha and the gun.

"Do *you* know?" She lowered the weapon, thumbing on the safety and slid it back into the holster, her penetrating gaze sweeping his face.

He stared sadly at the weapon. "You needs be more specific. My facility with riddles ran off with my memories."

"Your injuries, when you came back here, looked like somebody was trying damned hard to kill you."

"Odin can be enthusiastic." Natasha smirked knowingly at his answer and he looked away, a memory skittering from his grasp. His eyes once again went to the gun. "A key aspect of science is testing one's hypothesis."

"I'm not giving you what you want."

He smiled cheerlessly. "It's what Barton would want."

"He wants your head on his wall. But trophies aren't much fun unless you shoot them yourself. I'm not stealing his kill."

"But how will we know if bullets work?" he said with impish charm.

At this Natasha almost rolled her eyes. "Assuming you're not screwing with Darcy—"

"To paraphrase one of your past presidents, 'I have never had sexual relations with that woman,'" he drawled.

"-maybe you should rethink your death wish. "

"You care about me," he said, sarcastically, "I'm flattered."

"Don't be. Me and the rest of the Avengers are already planning your death party. It'll be the blow-out of the century."

"Really? Will there be cake? Ice cream?"

"Pony rides and a little bouncy castle." She strolled past him, stopping and turning in the doorway. "But Darcy won't be there, because the 'silly girl' will be home mourning you. If there's any empathy left in your reptile brain, maybe you should consider that the next time you consider throwing yourself off a bridge, metaphorical or literal."

He laughed, the sound bouncing off the bunker's metal walls. "Weren't you warning her off me a few short days ago?" Assuming he knew the topic, he hadn't bothered to spy on her conversation with Darcy.

"She's a lot smarter than she acts. She's a pretty shrewd observer of the world around her, but she's young, just a kid."

"Ah," said Loki, wryly, "Whilst you are a veritable ancient."

She ignored his mocking. "I can't warn her off you because that's not possible at this point. But I can let her know what she's getting herself into."

Effortlessly, he affected his innocent expression, but he quickly surmised what she meant. She had told Darcy that by associating with Loki, she elevated herself from humble science assistant to a pawn in SHIELD's game. It seemed an odd admission for Natasha. Was it part of the game or merely a rare spot of genuine concern for a younger, inexperienced woman?

He leaned against the doorframe, eyes on Natasha's posterior (it was a nice view) as she climbed

the stairs and wondered if Darcy would forgive him for his harsh words and why it mattered.

"I could never hurt you," he had said with complete sincerity. Frustrated by his growing attraction, he sometimes envisioned pushing her away, with violence if necessary, but could never follow through with action.

His thoughts took an especially shameful turn the night they'd returned from Zozobra. He eyed her, sitting across from him at the kitchen table, her blue eyes shadowed by weariness and a bit too much alcohol. She made a jest about SHIELD that carried a strong undercurrent of truth and he smiled, a retort on his lips. The easy bond of friendship tightened between them like a violin string and sang out a note, perfectly in tune. Unfortunately, the tone struck discord with the black and malevolent thing inside him and it struggled, snarling, trying to break free.

The darkness spoke: *It would be so easy.*

*Give her what she wants. Take her back to her room, and kiss her sweetly.*

*Then bind all sound in the room. Kiss her again and hold her down on the bed, rough enough to shake loose the ghost that haunts her. Use her, then leave her, broken and alone.*

*She'll never shadow your steps again. Likely she'll never speak of what happened, not to Thor or Jane, for the shame, because it was she who invited the monster into her bed.*

Darcy had blinked owlishly at him through her glasses, sensing his dark mood, but still too trusting to flee. Self hatred boiled like hot lead in his stomach and he looked away. Is this what he had become? A horror who would visit such misery on the one being in the universe who wanted him for himself?

Rape had never been his flavor of mischief, but to contemplate such a thing against Darcy, when he so frequently imagined the bloody vengeance he would wreak on the one who had assaulted her years before? That was a bitter and cruel irony.

*I am a monster. I belong in darkness. Alone.*

Another voice, offered a quieter counterpoint. *Thoughts are not actions. Darcy is unharmed. Jane still lives.*

But sunk deep in recrimination, Loki ignored that voice. *I should remain alone.*

The monster nonetheless wandered into her room soon after, and with the bedclothes between them, pulled her to him. Even beneath the covers, she burned hot with the fire of companionship and her heat lulled him to sleep. With her at his side, the nightmares never came and he could finally sleep.

The following day, in a moment of stupid jealousy, the monster finally hurt her. "Thor's not the boss of me," she had said and he knew that. But he had already worked himself into a blind lather, certain that she had sided with Thor over him.

The ugly thing inside him struck out with words, a far more potent weapon than violence. He smiled in grim admiration. She was no defenseless maiden, that one. She'd taken her injury, fueled her retort with pain and paid him back in kind.

He was no stranger to the scorn, scolding and disappointment of others, but had anyone before ever bitten with such an obvious truth? His kind, immortal, eternally beautiful and gifted with tremendous power, were driven by the same base desires as weakling mortals. Of course, he saw

himself above such things.

*We all think our cause is just and grounded in hard logic, don't we?*

More of that damnable clarity imposed by Darcy's bright presence in his life. So what now? Oblivion still called, the weight of millennia sat heavy on his shoulders; he felt as worn and weak as an elderly mortal. He doubted they would kill him, but he had been serious about testing Natasha's bullets. The tug of new schemes, however, grew stronger each day as he recovered more and more of himself, and this mortal world, with its complexities, fascinated him.

He could do it; move forward *without* the complication of Darcy, alone as he had always been. The shadows beckoned, the habitual paths that he'd followed for so long were opening. With Darcy, her light blinded him, knocked him off balance; he staggered about, trying to find familiar footing. With her, he had to think of someone else, as expressed by the kiss before Natasha, the public declaration that yes, Darcy mattered to him, and that SHIELD should make her safety a priority.

Alone, he would have no such concerns.

But with Darcy, the weight sloughed from his brain, like a horse shedding a thick winter's coat to reveal the sleek animal beneath, thoughts now free to race in strange new directions. Intriguing options revealed themselves, roads not taken, as the Midgard poet wrote. With her, he was inspired.

He paused at the base of the steps, familiar darkness behind him, and the light from the kitchen before him. His eyes shut for a few seconds and when he opened them, he had made his decision.

## Chapter 21

### CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

After Loki and Thor left on Friday, Jane and Darcy had gathered their things and made the drive to the SHIELD facility, a security escort in a black SUV following like an obedient puppy. "Feels kind weird, just you and me, huh?" observed Darcy. Jane nodded sadly, probably already missing Thor.

As they passed the Richards's house, Darcy waved goodbye to Rocket and Meteor. The lab lizard, sitting on the dashboard before her, turned its attention from her boobs to look out the window. Darcy glowered at the reptile.

Loki's pet and probable spy had slithered into her room while she was packing and then accompanied her and Jane as they left the house. When it trotted across the porch, Inkblot, who'd been sitting on the porch steps, pounced on it.

"No!" said Darcy.

In just a heartbeat, Inkblot yowled and leaped backwards. The black cat landed a few feet away, yellow eyes blazing at the little lizard. "Told you," said Darcy to the feline as she dragged her heavy suitcase through the sand and gravel to the SUV.

The lizard peered expectantly up from the ground at Darcy as she climbed in the vehicle. With a sneer, she slammed the door hard, leaving it there. Jane gave her a questioning look and Darcy shook her head. "Start the car, let's go." The engine rumbled to life and the SUV began to roll toward the street.

Her resolve broke just before they reached the street. "Wait!" Jane hit the brakes and Darcy unsnapped her seatbelt and opened the door. The lizard, a tiny gray form on the tan sand, was still where she'd left it. "Get in," she said. It zipped right over and she bent to help it into the vehicle.

Jane grinned. "Shut up," said Darcy, holding back a smile.

Darcy and Jane were each given their own small apartment on Floor Two, which lay right under Floor One and the administrative offices. Darcy's apartment consisted of one large room that functioned as a combination living and dining room with a small kitchenette. A stacked washer and dryer were hidden away in a closet. There were two doors at the back of the main room, one to a bathroom, the other to the bedroom. The style of the apartment's furnishings was sleek contemporary, made with materials like pale blond bamboo, stainless steel, and crisp brown leather. Not her style, but nice. The living room was equipped with a widescreen TV and a bitchin' stereo system with an iPod jack.

Darcy set her ID and key card on the table, and the lizard, riding on her shoulder, scurried down her arm and hopped onto the polished surface. "Nice pad," she said. From what Max and other guards had told her, most of the staff apartments weren't this posh. No doubt this was a perk of being the perceived girlfriend of SHIELD's favorite bad guy. She wondered if SHIELD would have given her a cot and shiny metal prison toilet if they knew she and Loki were on the outs.

Claws slipping on the table's shiny metal legs, the lizard half fell to the floor, gave its tail an angry lash and then began to scurry along the room's perimeter. Darcy watched it, a thought forming in her mind.



"Hey!" She clapped her hands to get the creature's attention. "What do you bet this place is full of bugs and I don't mean spiders. Make yourself useful. Seek and destroy." The lizard watched her with unblinking dark eyes.

With a sigh, she got her suitcase and purse and went into the bedroom, muttering, "And now, I'm talking to lizards." A minute later, however, she heard a loud hiss and a pop. Soon after, the little striped reptile wandered into the bedroom and began to nose about. It disappeared under the dresser and a second later, hiss, then pop. Darcy wrinkled her nose at the smell of something burning. "Just don't set the whole place on fire, huh?"

About thirty minutes and at least a half dozen destroyed listening devices later, Darcy was done unpacking. Because she figured he was the only one who could really understand her predicament, she fired up her laptop and sent Sean a message: "L and T off saving the world. J and I in protective custody, trapped underground, 7th plane of hell. Hope your mom is OK. See you soon."

She gathered her key card and ID and crouched, hand on the floor. The lizard hurried up her arm and onto her shoulder. "Let's go see what being Thor's not-old lady got Jane."

Jane's apartment was just as nice, but decorated in Arts & Crafts mode with lots of oak Stickley style furniture. Darcy sent the lizard off to de-bug Jane's place as well.

"It's really nice, isn't it?" said Jane, as she hung a light jacket on a hanger. "Too nice."

Darcy said nothing and took one of Jane's shirts from her suitcase, refolded it and put it in a drawer.

"This is because of Thor," said Jane a little bitterly. "SHIELD is trying to make nice with Asgard."

Darcy folded another shirt. Even though she'd had the same thought, different Asgardian, she said, "Give yourself more credit, Jane. You're the principal investigator on a major scientific project." Jane gave her a dubious look. "It's true. I still don't understand half of what you and Loki talk about, but I know your research is giving SHIELD a serious technological edge." The more she talked, the more it made sense. Jane was important, all on her own.

She eyed her own reflection in the mirror, noting her hair was smooshed from the baseball cap she'd worn earlier. *Me, I'm just the research assistant.* Taking a brush from the dresser, she ran it through her hair. Feeling the prickly sense of someone watching her, she turned.

Jane smiled. "You're important, too."

"Puh-lease. You'd be way better off with some brainiac astrophysics post-grad type."

"Who'd call my ideas ludicrous." Jane walked over and took the brush from Darcy's hands. Moving behind her, she ran the brush through the hair on the back of her head. "Who would probably freak out about Thor and Loki, especially Loki." She lapsed into silence, concentrating on brushing Darcy's hair. "Who wouldn't be my friend."

Looking over her shoulder, Jane met Darcy's eyes in the mirror's reflection. "We are friends, aren't we?" asked Jane.

Darcy turned and grinned at Jane. "Dude. Totally."

Looking at the brush, Jane said, "I've been so wrapped up in my research for so long sometimes I think I've lost the ability to be anyone's friend."

"That's bullshit and you know it," said Darcy. "You could pull your nose out of the books more

often, but you're nothing like the trolls in other labs. They probably turn into statues when exposed to sunlight."

Jane laughed and Darcy grinned, remembering what Ryan, the facility manager told her when he showed her the apartment. "SHIELD's got a huge movie library for streaming. Let's have a girls' night. Chick flicks, popcorn. Ice cream, if I can find some in the break room."

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When Darcy shut her door that night after saying goodbye to Jane, the uglier parts of the day's events - Fury arriving with the news that there had been another murder, her fight with Loki - collapsed on her like a ton of bricks.

In the short term, a rom-com film festival, plus popcorn and booze, were a terrific distraction. No ice cream was available in the break room, so Darcy had wandered around the few floors that she could access, looking for something more potent. Alcohol was forbidden in the facility. So naturally, it only took Darcy a few minutes to find a guard, who knew another guard, who knew another who ran the equivalent of a Prohibition-Era speakeasy out of a utility closet. She bought a bottle of white wine that went on to die a quick death at her and Jane's hands.

Possibly because of the alcohol sloshing in her bloodstream, she leaned, back to the door, staring at the strange apartment she had to call home for the several days. Or maybe, the door needed her to hold it up. Yeah, that.

Mostly, she didn't want to take another step into the lonely room, buried deep under the desert sand, and so not home. The bedroom door was a dark rectangle against the pale beige wall of the main room. Loneliness tugged at her heart and she cursed herself. How did she get so used to having him around, in her bed, after such a short time?

*Don't think about him.*

If Loki could win medals in the ignoring people Olympics, then Darcy would be bowed under the weight of gold in the put-aside-the-bad-stuff-and-move-on competition.

Lately, her ability to erect an impenetrable wall (with gun turrets and guards), between herself and the past was failing more and more often. If this was a sign of some newfound maturity, she would rather be a child.

*Crass. Childish.*

She shut her eyes. Opening them, a flicker of movement caught her eye: the lizard, disappearing behind the entertainment center, perhaps looking for a place to leave reptile turds. The little beast did eat. Jane, being Jane, had offered it a tiny bit of her dinner, chicken masala, which it devoured eagerly. It also enjoyed popcorn.

With the lizard vanished behind the furniture, the lonely knot tightened, partnered with sadness that leaked through a hole in her emotional walls.

*"You are nothing. You are insignificant...you are a stu-"*

What did she expect? That she could actually reach him? That there was anything left to reach?

Sure, he was gorgeous, and smart, and sometimes funny, but he was also a murderer, just like the nutbar who had killed Max and Andy, and...what was his name?... King, Arnold King. It made her a little sad that she could hardly remember the man's name. That's how it went, people died all the

time, their passing unnoticed by most of the rest of the world.

Thoughts turning gloomy, she could almost see Loki's point. Against the vast passage of his long lifetime, mortals' lives flickered and died like dampened matches. That, however, didn't make it okay for him to use her, because that's what she knew he'd done. For whatever reason, he thought playing nice with Jane's assistant might gain him some advantage. Perhaps he thought he could fool Papa Odin into thinking that he had made like Thor, been redeemed by a mortal's love, blah-blah-blah, romance-cakes.

She could see why he chose her. He'd probably heard the muttered gossip about what she was and specifically, wasn't. Darcy Lewis, the incompetent science assistant who thought a "quark" was a duck imitating a dog and a "gluon," a clump of mascara. (Okay, those were the first things that *still* came to mind when she heard those words, but she knew their correct definitions.)

"I had a big red target on my ass," she said to the boring bathroom mirror - no cool illusions in the background - after she washed her face. Except a few months were all Loki could stand in Darcy's company. Whatever he thought he might gain by befriending her, faking it, anyway, just wasn't worth the hassle of actually dealing with her.

A spasm lurched in her diaphragm and rose as a short gulping sob in her chest. Through the sudden flood of moisture in her eyes, the lizard, who was doing a little spinning dance on the bathroom floor, glittered in the light. Loki's little spy, watching her cry.

"No. I'm not crying over him. Nuh-uh." She crossed her arms over her chest, blinked away tears and made for the bedroom. When she sat on the bed, the lizard scurried up her leg, and then jumped to the nightstand. *Find the funny, find the funny.*

She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "I hope The Hulk turns Loki into his personal squeaky toy."

Triangular head cocked to the side, the lizard watched her.

Lifting her right hand, she closed it around an imaginary toy. With a scrunched up face, she said, "Arrrrgh!" and then, "Squeak, squeak, squeak," while clenching and unclenching her fingers.

The lizard lowered its head to the nightstand's surface, looking sort of sad, if that were possible.

"What? Too soon?" The little animal blinked slowly.

"Your loyalty is pointless," she said. "He turned his back on you too, almost left you in the Santa Fe Plaza. If it weren't for me, you'd still be there, dodging clumsy tourists. By now, Tex would have caught you and turned you into a pair of boots." Teeny, tiny boots, the kind that might hang from a key chain.

The lizard spun around, facing away from her and then flipped onto its back, white belly pointed skyward, legs limply out to the side. Darcy leaned forward and down, studying it a little worriedly. Had it just died? The flutter of tiny ribs let her know it was still breathing.

"That's how you sleep? You're as weird as he is."

Darcy's gaze dropped to the crisp tan Berber carpet, then panned to the tall bamboo armoire that served as a closet. Her eye stopped on a one of the door's handles, cast in aluminum with a swirled pattern on the face. That conjured the image of the dark red rose that Loki had given her. The tune from the Asgard waltz on her iPod, wistful melody against an upbeat rhythm, echoed in her head.

*Just another part of his game. Hate him.*

Shutting her eyes as more treacherous tears blurred her vision, she went back to feeble humor. *Squeaky toy for The Hulk*. That ploy turned against her as the funny image of toy Loki morphed into battered and bloody Loki, giving way to the Loki from her nightmare, lying on the porch, emerald eyes glazed with death.

*"The part with you...gone, that couldn't be true. Because you can't really die, right?"*

*"Everything dies, Darcy."*

"Shit!" She pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes, so hard that she saw spots. "I'm screwed. The nightmare is going to come back," she said to her reptile companion. "I forgot Loki's magic repellent device thingy."

With a scritch-scratch of tiny claws, the lizard righted itself. It looked around the room and then shot off the nightstand and hurried across the carpet, striped body undulating like a snake. Stopping at the dresser, it jumped, slipped, then jumped again, feet finding purchase on the shiny bamboo and scaling its way to the top. Without pausing, it zipped across the top and into her purse, only its gray whiptail in sight. Something made a plastic crackling sound.

"Need a tampon?" she asked, dryly.

Back legs appeared after the tail, claws digging into leather as the lizard pulled itself slowly from the purse. A second later, the rest of the lizard emerged, followed by a thin brass stick.

"The hell?" The stick had legs and it was feebly resisting the lizard's efforts to extract it from Darcy's purse. The sheets tangled in her legs as she scrambled out of bed and she nearly went face first onto the floor in her rush to see what had emerged from the purse. The lizard looked up at her, almost smugly. The expression reminded her of Loki and she gave it a death glare.

The reptile's quarry stood on her purse, swaying on skinny segmented brass legs. Antennae constructed from thin copper wire and some sort of clear filament waved rhythmically. When she bent for a closer look, a faint hum reached her ears.

The lizard was back to leering at her boobs. Darcy snapped her fingers in its face. "A portable magic repelling thing? Shaped like a stick bug?" She recognized the device as what he'd been messing with before their fight. The lizard's response was to bob up and down, kind of like reptile pushups.

Darcy considered the robo-bug and then gently plucked the thing from her purse. Vibrations purred through her fingertips and the bug lifted its tiny metal head toward her, black crystal eyes catching the light. She planned to set it on the nightstand, but the lizard rushed to the spot, immediately flipping over, eyes shut, reclaiming its place. Thinking it was a better place anyway, she set the metal insect atop the bed's headboard.

Finding a weird comfort in the funny little device, she switched off the light. "I still hate him," she told the darkness defiantly.

\*\*\*

By Friday, a week after Thor and Loki had gone off to play hero and unhappy sidekick with the Avengers, Darcy could feel her sanity begin to fray like an old sweater. Returning to her room that evening, she paced the living room like a stir crazy zoo animal. At this rate, she was going to start flinging her own poo. Her situation made her think of Loki, powerful, immortal, but broken and

trapped on Earth among mortals, and a trickle of pity leaked past the hate she'd been nurturing all week.

The accommodations given to her and Jane were spiffy, but she hated everything about the place anyway.

There were no yipping coyotes at night, but instead the constant drone of the climate controls. The air was stuffy. It felt like being stuck on the longest airplane flight ever. The coffee, of course, didn't have the delicious chocolate taste. The cereal from the break room tasted the same, but mornings were boring without Thor and Loki. The gym had treadmills and stationary bicycles, but she loathed both; they made her feel like a hamster on a wheel.

On Monday, Pam invited her to dinner with two other guards. Darcy accepted and the practice continued throughout the week, in part because Jane, without the motivation to go home and play house with Thor, stayed in the lab working till midnight or later. On Wednesday morning, Darcy came in to find her sleeping at the table, having never gone back to her apartment.

The only daylight Darcy saw was when she and Jane dropped by the house at lunch to feed Inkblot. They were accompanied by a terribly nondescript guard, named, appropriately, Bob. Darcy couldn't tell if Bob was a Loki hater or not because his only facial expression could be best described as "awake."

"He's a robot, one of SHIELD's newest designs," Darcy told Jane after they returned from the house on day.

Bob would, however, make a big show of entering the house before the women, gun drawn, ready for what, Darcy didn't know. Jane and Darcy would exchange an eye roll behind his back; Darcy would then mouth, "Ro-bot," at Jane, and for some reason, they'd dissolve into stupid giggles.

Sean returned to New Mexico on Friday, pale and worn. Thinking he needed the sun as much as they did, she dragged him along with her and Jane on the daily trek out to the little house trailer in the desert. Interestingly, around Jane, he retreated even farther into his shy boy persona.

On Saturday morning, she ran on the hated treadmill until her legs felt like limp noodles and sweat poured off her body even though the gym's climate controls, like the labs', were stuck on "arctic." Returning to her apartment, she found Ryan, the facilities manager, at Jane's door.

Jane smiled brightly at Darcy. "Ryan says Thor and Loki are coming back today. We can go home."

Even though she was a sopping, sweaty mess, Darcy flung herself at Ryan and gave him a big hug. "Sorry, dude," she said afterwards, brushing apologetically at the dark splotch on his midnight blue shirt, "Sometimes, it sucks to be the bearer of good news."

\*\*\*

In theory, the impending return of Darcy and Jane's immortal roommates was good news. At five o'clock that evening, she and Jane were allowed to go home, albeit with Bob going through his commando routine throughout the house. Darcy was tempted to yell, "Boo," just to see him jump. But startling a man with a loaded gun was too rash a move even for her.

In practice, the Asgardians' return meant the return of not only Thor, but his brother-not-brother who Darcy now hated. To be honest, she couldn't hate him now anymore than she could six months ago when they first met. But hate was all she had and she was sticking with it.

They were supposed to get in around eleven, so Darcy went to bed at the absurdly early hour of nine. It was so nice being back in her room, that she actually fell asleep soon after head met pillow.

The clomp-clomp of feet on the wooden porch, reverberating though the home's framing, awoke her along with the splash of light from a vehicle's headlights through her windows. Turning onto her side, she curled her knees toward her chest, and tried to slow her breathing and drift back to sleep. Of course, trying to make yourself fall asleep was as easy as slamming a revolving door. Knowledge that he was back in the house jabbed energetically at her consciousness, making sleep impossible. Footfalls made the floorboards squeak, doors opened and shut with dull thuds, Thor's laughter rose in deep contrast to Jane's.

The minutes dragged on interminably as she battled with her brain's refusal to go unconscious, which of course, made her angry and more awake. She wanted absolutely nothing to do with him and was desperate to see him again. The distant wail of a siren came from somewhere in Puente Antiguo and she thought, *Whatever that's about, I didn't do it.*

She lapsed into a silly argument with her eyelids, which wanted to pop open. *Nothing to see here, stay shut.*

*Loki pretty.*

*Loki's a prick. Shut. Sleep.*

The noises of Thor and Loki's return subsided and the silence grew, feeling like a presence all its own. *Sleep, dammit.* Because, what else could she do? If it were day, she could go for a long bike ride or run, pushing on until the burn in her lungs and legs exorcised him from her thoughts.

Minutes stretched in ways that must have violated several laws of physics. Grim anticipation started to lose out to her body's relief to be back in her own bed, without tons of claustrophobia-inducing dirt over her head. She had started to fall asleep when the awareness of him prickled at her consciousness, sending little tremors up her spine.

He came in through the door, like a normal, non-magical person. She wondered if he'd be arrogant enough to think he could climb back in bed with her. Pity she hadn't thought to put her Taser under the pillow. It really couldn't hurt him, but maybe a good zap would make his hair stand on end like one of those troll dolls her friend Kelly collected.

Opening her eyes, the first thing she saw was the lizard snoozing on the nightstand, white fish belly pointed to the ceiling, unaware of its master's return. The metal stick insect, on its new perch on the lampshade before the window, glittered in the moonlight.

Apparently, Loki's attention went to the same thing. His familiar smooth voice broke the silence. "The automaton really isn't necessary here. The other device is more effective."

If her fingers weren't itching to wrap around his skinny neck and throttle him, she would have admitted that she thought the bug was pretty. The God of Mischief had a surprising artistic side. Put together from tiny segments of copper, brass and steel, the magical device resembled an expensive piece of Art Deco jewelry.

Without turning in his direction, she said, "Whatever. Get out."

"No."

An angry combination of sigh and snort escaped her mouth. She sat up and scoured the dark shadows by the door. Finding him, she hit him with a fiery glare. "This is my room. My kingdom. I

rule here. Get out. Not just get out. Get the fuck out."

"Make me," he said with an infuriating smirk.

Her eyebrows shot toward her hairline. "Oh, you so don't want to go there, Loony Tunes. I'll make you squeal like a Justin Bieber fan girl."

"You and what army?" The smirk got wider.

Automatically, she looked at her desk, where the Taser sat, and calculated the distance. Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw a gleam of teeth as he laughed quietly. Oh, no, he *did not* think this was funny. Hearing the sound of something scratching on wood, she turned and saw that the lizard was awake, its head moving back and forth, watching her and Loki. "Sic 'em," she said, knowing damn well the little beast wouldn't attack its master.

It sprang from the nightstand and shot across the floor, a pale streak in the moonlight. A tiny yellow flame flashed in the darkness, and then another, and another.

"Oh, shit," she said as Loki's tall dark form moved, foot stamping hard on the carpeted floor. "No! Stop! You'll kill it."

She was across the room in an instant, trying to capture the angry little dragon lizard, which was doing a spectacular job of not getting turned into a red splotch on the carpet. "Stop. Bad lizard. I mean, good lizard, but stop anyway." The thing really needed a name. "Off. Down. Whoa." Pain spread up her fingers as she grabbed for it, missed and got a handful of flames. "Ow! Fuck."

"Enough." Magic vibrated through her and cinnamon sank into her skin. The lizard flailed furiously, suspended a couple feet off the ground. Loki reached down and grabbed it.

Fearing he'd crush it, she rose to her feet. "Please. Don't. It's just a dumb animal."

Loki rolled his eyes. In his hand, the lizard struggled a bit more, tail smacking against his hand and wrist with sharp snaps, little flames shooting out of its mouth. "You turned it against me." Under his glower, the little creature slumped, frustrated and limp in his hand.

If she did, she didn't know how. "Yeah. Because I'm awesome. Give it back." She held her hand out, wincing as the motion stretched burned skin.

"You're hurt," he said, setting the reptile in her hand, fingers brushing her palm.

She tried to ignore the tingles his touch produced. "I'm fine." *Like you give a crap.* Obviously feeling cocky, the lizard belched another flame in Loki's direction. Turning before Loki changed his mind and slew her unlikely protector, she walked back to the nightstand and set it down. "Stay," she said to the lizard.

Refusing to look at him, she got back in bed, pulling the covers over herself. "There some reason you're here? Slumming? Visiting the stupid and insignificant?"

"You cannot believe my words held any measure of truth."

Flipping onto her side again, she set her attention on the lizard, who watched Loki warily. "I know I'm not stupid," she said, with a conviction that surprised her. "I *believe* you think I am."

He didn't respond immediately, and the silence opened like a chasm between them. "Truly, Darcy?" he said after a minute. "Knowing me, as you do?" Another pause. "Seeing through me, as

you do, can you envision a reality where I would have the patience to tolerate stupidity for any length of time?"

"A few months is a blink of an eye to you, right? No time at all."

He laughed, the sound low and bitter. "I've suffered far worse for much longer, but this situation, trapped amongst mortals," she could hear his sneer, "with Thor, is less than ideal. A few months has been at least several long blinks of an eye."

At that she sat up and found him still cloaked in shadows, out of the light cast by the full moon through the window. "Jokes, Loki? *Truly?*" She spoke the last word as he had, except she'd never been much good at accents. Reaching over the lizard she grabbed her glasses and put them on so she could give him an in-focus death glare. "You say awful shit to me, hurt me," her voice cracked, "and then think you can just waltz back in acting like nothing happened? I don't even think Thor would be that dense."

Even with her glasses, his face was a pale blur, body a tall patch of dark gray in the murky shadows, but she could see the tension build in his body, the anger drawing his mouth into a hard line, eyes black and burning with inhuman anger. She cocked her head, taking on her irreverent armor, waiting for the next round of sharp words to hit her.

When he didn't speak right away, she said, "This is where you say, 'I'm Loki of Asgard,' and tell me I have no right to speak to your arrogant, pigheaded self." She rolled her eyes. "For such a supposedly smart and sneaky guy, you're totally predictable." The lizard tensed and Darcy slapped her hand down on the nightstand, over its tail, preventing another kamikaze run at Loki.

The fire of anger in her belly flared and then inexplicably, spluttered and died. Her shoulders slumped and she set her gaze on a spot a few feet to his right, suddenly emotionally exhausted. She'd been rehearsing this confrontation all week, but now, with him before her, her clever scripted dialogue slipped from her mind. "Unless you plan on doing something original, go away."

Silence, this time more like the Grand Canyon than a simple chasm, widened in the darkness. Under her palm, the lizard's tail tugged and she lifted her hand. "No," she said firmly to her tiny guard dog.

"Would an apology be 'original?'"

Lifting her attention from the floor, she studied him. Moody, exasperating bastard that he was, his expression had turned sort of befuddled, almost boyish, anger now exchanged for a slight twitchy energy.

"Only if it's sincere. Lies are your M.O."

He took two hesitant steps toward her and stopped, looking oddly awkward. "If you were truly 'insignificant,' I would not have struck at you. If you were 'nothing,' it would not have mattered that I thought you were doing Thor's bidding. If you were stupid, I would not suffer this need for your company." His eyes took in the room in a disorderly sweep, before meeting hers. "You confuse me, unnerve me, leaving me feeling rudderless, you make me..." He shivered, a touch of anger rising in his eyes. "You make me *feel*." His fists clenched.

"You are my friend." As he spoke the last word, Loki flinched, as if the word hurt. Darcy felt her anger give way, just a little, to pity. "I am unfamiliar with such an entanglement, particularly when it is given freely, without hidden agenda or seeking benefit." He let out a soft laugh. "Neither is Thor, for that matter. Nothing is ever quite so simple in Asgard. Not for a prince, certainly not for



one such as me."

Darcy felt herself nodding in understanding. After all, she had spent four years studying the various ways humans tried to screw each other over using political structures. It wasn't hard to imagine that a monarchy like Asgard was driven by insincerity, backstabbing and ass kissing, same as any other place, but with an immortal twist.

"My words to you were cruel. I cannot say they were not meant to hurt because they were. My intention at the moment was to drive you away." Out-of-character vulnerability owned his lean face. "I hope I haven't. I hope you will accept my apology."

His honesty pulled at her heart, but she pushed the feeling aside. "Will this be your pattern? Tear me down, then expect forgiveness because you flashed your pretty green eyes at me?" Shaking her head, she added, "Because, nuh-uh, I'm not climbing on that dysfunctional, abusive ride."

A slight smile arched his mouth. "You are suggesting I should learn from my mistakes."

"Yeah. Silly me."

Bitterness swept over him, making him look tired. "I am, *was*...a prince, briefly a king. I'm not accustomed to the informal framework that friendship takes here on Midgard." He gave her a sad look. "I will likely fall into old habits and anger you. My temper will still get the best of me at times."

He took another step closer. "But I will endeavor never to belittle you or wound you as I did that day." With an almost shy smile, he added, "And I expect, when I remind you of your place, you will continue to remind me of mine."

Her own grin broke through. "Expect it, be ready for it, brace yourself." Oh, crap, she was easy. One cute little smile and her backbone vacated the premises, probably hunting for a body with more willpower.

They stared at each other, suspended in the quiet that was broken by the occasional outburst of a cricket under the window. His face was startlingly open, a kind of question in his eyes, but he turned away first. She ran a curious look over him, finding something that didn't quite make sense. Before she could ask, he strode up to the window, and examined the lizard and stick insect like a general inspecting the troops.

"The device worked, then?"

She nodded. The last of her anger dissipated and the need for him started to burn inside her, kindled by his proximity. The full moon energetically beamed white light through the blinds, casting hard stripes of light and dark on him. She blinked through her glasses, trying to make sense of his clothing. "What are you wearing?"

"An artifice."

She sat up straighter and scowled. "I don't like it."

To this, he looked down at her, a mixture of irritation and confusion on his face. "Wasn't it you who wanted me to play along, blend?"

Her eyes played up and down his tall frame. "Yeah, I did, but I didn't mean this." She met his stare, noting that his eyes were shadowed by dark half circles. "I don't want you to go picking fights with everybody on the planet. But you're still Loki of Asgard. I bet Thor doesn't have to blend this

much." She squinted, seeing something odd about the whites of his eyes. "I said play along, not lose yourself."

"Ah, well, the next time the matter arises, I should tell them that Darcy doesn't approve," he said with grim smile.

"Sure, why not?" She pulled her knees to her chest, the covers pulling against her legs. "Thor does what Jane tell him to do. Pepper owns Tony. If Steve had a girlfriend, he'd be 'Yes, ma'am-ing' 24-hours a day."

His gaze rose from her, finding something fascinating about the paintings of sunflowers over the bed. "You are implying a parallel between those relationships and ours."

She dropped her gaze from him to stare across the room, where the stripes of moonlight fell against the far wall, broken by a tall, lanky shadow. "I guess that's stupid. We're barely friends."

"You know that isn't true," he said, his voice shadowed with frustration. He was staring out the window again.

"Right. You tolerate the idea of friendship in exchange for ice cream." With a wry face, she added, "Which makes you kind of a dessert whore."

"Where once I sold my soul for an army and infinite power, I now trade it for frozen treats."

"Honestly, you've traded up. Armies are overrated." Scooting toward the head of the bed, and drawing her legs to hang over the edge of the bed, she patted the spot next to her. "Sit down. You're making me nervous." She pulled off her glasses and set them down, giving the lizard an affectionate scratch on the head.

The bed shook slightly under his weight as he sat, curiously, without his usual hesitation. Up close, she saw that there were splotches of red in the whites of his eyes, like little red blossoms on dendritic vessels. Without thinking, she put her hands on the sides of his face, turning him to her. "What did they do to you?"

He sneered. "I did it to myself." He closed his eyes as she move her hands up, fingertips tracing over his eyebrows from the center of his face outward. "The unmaking of manmade materials, concrete and steel, is a straightforward enough spell, but best optimized with an efficient transfer of energy." He opened his eyes. "It took some experimentation to find pathway that put the least strain on my body."

Darcy frowned. "So they have you doing magic on command?"

His mouth twitched with a bitter smile. He reached to her, cool fingers touching her collarbone near the hollow of her throat then moving up till his hand was around her neck. "I missed you," he said.

Her hands were still on his face. "Why? None of the Avengers unnerving enough for you?"

He tilted his head, as though listening to something she couldn't hear, and for a second she realized that the guy with his hand around her neck had been recently insane. The guy who Jane had said, "...looked at me like he wanted to rip my throat out with his bare hands."

"My beloved monster," he said. His lips pressed against hers in a quick kiss, cautious, as if he expected her to reject him.

*Like that'll happen.* "I missed you, too." Her hands fell away from his face, coming to rest on the unfamiliar contours of the SHIELD body armor.

His other hand moved to her neck, both on either side, his thumbs pressed to her pulse. "If you would have me," he began, "I would take you, tonight, in this bed."

Darcy's fingers twitched and tightened on the stiff leather; she swallowed, her heart thundering in her rib cage. "You mean...sex?"

The hands at her neck tightened, and she could feel her racing heartbeat flutter against his thumbs. "I would make love to you, a slow exploration of each and every place on your body, that when touched in the precise manner, strips you of all reason and makes you mine." Pulling her toward him, he pressed his forehead to hers. "But, I fear my need makes that impossible, at least, in the immediate." He closed his eyes. "I cannot hurt you, but I cannot be gentle either." Pushing away lightly, he lifted and scrutinized his hands. "In wanting, I am deprived of patience, with no aptitude for preamble or subtleties..."

Darcy took his hands in hers, aware that her own were unsteady. "I think here on Earth, we'd just say you want it now and you want it hard, fast." She shrugged with a cocky confidence she didn't feel. "It's safe to say the feeling is mutual."

Deftly turning his hand in hers, he lifted her left hand to his lips and laid a single kiss on the knuckles of her ring and middle fingers. With any other guy, the gesture would have been cute and sexy. From Loki, it was vested with the weight of chivalry, with everything he was, an undercurrent of promise and honor.

"Are you certain?" he asked, with a slight lift of a dark eyebrow and Darcy's unspoken history in his eyes.

Well, crap. That was how it worked, wasn't it? If she could see through him, the reverse was true. "N-no," she said. To be honest, she thought she was beyond this; it had taken a few years, but she had reclaimed her sexuality. But her recent lovers had been young men, amusingly overconfident, or charmingly awkward, and totally non-threatening.

Mimicking his action, she pulled his other hand to her face, pressing his knuckles to her mouth, remembering white bandages steeped in crimson. The hand in hers was big but put together from long, elegant bones covered in unscarred skin, fingers tapering to slim fingertips. Nothing like Thor's big meaty paws, but still preternaturally strong.

"You need not do this, certainly not for me." His voice carried bitterness, though not directed at her. "Least of all for me." He freed his hands, gave her shoulder a companionable rub and turned to look across the room.

"No," she said resolutely. "It's for me." She leaned against his side, all his terrifying strength at her side. Even dressed in mortal clothes, he was still Loki; on the slightest whim, he could force her to do anything and she'd be powerless to stop him.

Her fingers began to investigate the leather and heavy cloth. "I need to take back...me," she said, finding a seam and following it, searching for a buckle or other fastener. This stuff was worse than his Asgard armor. Not as sexy, either.

Cautious, he looked down at her hands on him, then sideways at her. Then his arms were around her, holding her tight. She shivered with fear and desire, but mostly desire. "Tell me," he said, "what I can do."

"Remind me that it's you I'm with, and not..."

His strong hands pushed her back from him and he trapped her in his smoldering gaze, chest rising and falling, expression burning with the suggestion that he wanted to tell her something important. Instead of speaking, he scooped her up and set her in the center of the bed. Covering her body with his, he laced their fingers together, pinning her hands to the bed. The burn on her hand smarted, but she used the pain to shield against fear.

He paused, face inches from hers. "Darcy." Her name was a question.

Trapped under him, she could feel old anxieties just under her desire for him. He shifted his weight, parting her legs with his knees. Leather scraped the soft skin on her thighs. She moved her legs, her bare feet following the contours of his lower leg and heavy boots. The long planes of his face added up to unnaturally handsome, alien, and yet irrationally familiar.

"Loki," was her answer.

He pressed his mouth to hers, hungry, almost bruising. Her heart racing faster than she thought possible, she forced her fears into the kiss, opening her mouth to him. Heat coursed through her as his tongue invaded her mouth. Lying beneath him, his mouth fierce with all he wanted to do to her, what she desperately wanted as well, she felt a barrier weaken inside her, and she gave herself to the desperation of the kiss.

Abruptly, her hands were free, and his hand at her waist, pushing up her T-shirt. Without his usual grace, he shoved the cotton material roughly, losing patience and pushing under fabric, his warm hand curving around her breast. His thumb circled her nipple and every cell in her body seemed to come alive. Her back arched, pressing into his touch and he broke the kiss. Their gazes met and he held her trapped with the urgency in his eyes.

A tiny hint of mischief sparkled in his eyes and he withdrew his touch, attention full on her face. She shivered at the loss and he flicked his thumb, just grazing sensitive flesh. Once, then again, a fleeting touch, then longer, then just a whisper. Her eyelids fluttered, as she melted under this hint of what he could do.

But he wasn't lying when he said he lacked patience. Rocking back onto his knees, he tugged at the bottom of her shirt, already bunched under her breasts, growled under his breath and ripped the fabric, yanking it back, exposing her to the cool night air. He tugged the garment off as far as it would go, pushing it partway down her upper arms like a button-up shirt. He laid a kiss on her bared shoulder, one hand on her previously neglected breast, thumb doing that terribly clever teasing thing.

She put her hand on his shoulder, muttering, "Dude, lose the leather." Being Loki, he ignored her, clever mouth following a hot trail along her collarbone, down over her right breast, onto the ticklish skin on her ribs and stopping at her panties. He paused, hands on her hips. His eyes asked the question and she sat up. Grabbing a handful of his hair, she kissed him hard, nipping his lower lip. She drew back and tugged at his collar. "I hate this."

Crossing his arms, fingers spread, hands at his shoulders, he shrugged the top section of the body armor off with a dizzying mix of magic and muscle. The black, form-fitting long-sleeve shirt beneath must have been Asgardian in origin, judging by the stitching at the collar and sleeves. This he shucked off the mundane way, peeling it up and over his head.

Moonlight cast him in stark chiaroscuro and Darcy hissed in a breath. Fully clothed, he was Thor's lanky, rather frail brother. The body before her could probably benefit from more regular meals,

but he was no flabby wimp. Her eyes followed the contours of hard, well-defined muscle and she felt a flush of blood rising to her skin, nerves firing with electric intensity between her thighs. Centuries of following Thor on his adventures had done Loki's body good.

She started to touch him, but he snagged his fingers in her panties' waistband and moved down her body, freeing her of the undergarment. He hopped off the bed and shed his boots and the rest of his clothes. Darcy had just enough time to get a quick look before he returned, fitting his mouth to hers and shoving her onto her back. Nope. Not a wimp down there, either.

Their kiss was frenetic, almost sloppy, teeth hitting teeth, panting into each other's mouths with raw need. With very little finesse, his hand groped her, fingers spread, palm rubbing over her chest, breasts, then circling the slight swell of her stomach, and up and down the outer curve of her thigh, like a blind man seeing with touch. She writhed under him, a yawning sense of emptiness between her legs.

He lifted his body, looming over her, gaze devouring her naked body. "Later," he said, breathless.

"Yeah, later," she said, hands at his waist, pulling him down to her. She was ready, but a nervous tremor ran through her as he paused at her entrance. He set a gentle hand on her face, keeping her eyes on his as he entered her. Slight pressure became sharp invasion as he slid inside her in one strong move. His eyes lost their focus and she let out a little whimper at being so filled, almost to the point of pain.

At first his movements were slow, and she knew, despite his fierce need, that he was restraining himself, allowing her to get accustomed to the way their bodies fit together. Retreat, advance, each time at a slightly different angle or speed, his hips pressing against the oversensitive skin of her inner thighs.

She moved her hips, matching his rhythm and he began to quicken the pace. Once again taking her hands in his, he eased himself down to her, her breasts tight to his bare chest, his long body pinning her to the bed.

His motions started to lose their subtlety, each thrust more forceful, demanding. A spike of fear prickled her subconscious, and then worked its way to her consciousness. The feeling of being trapped, helpless, grew and she began to lose track of where she was, who with. "Wait...I can't."

It took him a second, but he did. Pressing his forehead to hers, he paused. And then he did something unmistakably Loki. He kissed her carefully, once on each cheek, then on her forehead, and then between her breasts, and at each point of contact warmth sank into her skin, suffused with the delicious taste of cinnamon.

He made a funny cross-eyed face and the sensation of heat and cinnamon flared between her legs. Through her muzzy haze of lust and panic, she nevertheless grinned. "Oh, hell yeah. That. More."

Drawing back and then forward, he pushed the tingling magical energy into her core. It coiled around her nerve endings, finding pathways into the rest of her body. She curled her toes in pleasure. Skin burned against skin as once again he pressed her to the bed with his body. He began as if he had never stopped, hard and fast, with little hint of his previous control. She wrenched her hands from his, ignoring the pain from the burn on her fingers and wrapped her arms around his torso, fingertips clenching on the hard muscle of his back.

He nuzzled his face in the hair at the top of her head. "Darcy." His voice was gentle, but his thrusts almost an assault, as he were trying to purge himself of anger, frustration and misery, as if his memories and magic could be found within her. The ferocity of his lovemaking still stirred the past

in her, but she could still feel the magical taste of him. Her skin felt as though it had thinned and he was pouring into her.

She arched and met each bruising stroke with her hips, fingernails biting into his flesh. He was exorcising some of his demons in her and she did the same, taking him deep inside, using him, reducing him to the exquisite and shattering touch of lean, muscular body and delicious magic.

She felt herself dissolving, waves of pleasure originating from the place where they were joined, driven by the relentless rhythm. Sensing her completion, he slowed his pace, but not the force of his movements. He fondled her left breast, then right, teasing the nipple and a bright connection shot from her breasts down to her shivering, clenching flesh.

As her first release began to fade, he continued on, face buried in her hair, pummeling her with unflagging energy. The impacts pushed her toward the headboard and she grasped his shoulders so he could drive deep into her depths. A new climax began to build and she forgot how much his power terrified her, or perhaps she didn't and the overwhelming sense of him, on top of her, claiming her, bore her past the ghost that lurked in the back of her mind.

Or maybe it was the stupid, irrational trust she held for him.

His completion was announced with an almost startled gasp in her ear. The sensation of him shuddering above her, spilling inside her, pushed her over the edge. She spoke his name and tangled her fingers in his hair, as pure sensation flooded her body. Her back arched, but her arms released him, as her muscles grew weak with languid pleasure.

After, they lay motionless, his weight growing, both drained by the catharsis of what had happened between them. When he pushed himself to his elbows, her skin tingled with the absence of his touch, but she just smiled at him in drowsy happiness. "Unsubtle is so...wow."

He let out a small laugh. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"If you did, it was a good hurt." He was still inside her and very perky. She emphasized her point by clenching her muscles around him. His response was to scoop her up and rearrange them so that she was now on top of him.

She gave him a chaste peck on the cheek and sat up, examining the man who was now her lover. His hair was in lovely disarray, black and scruffy against the white pillow. His angular face wore a very male expression of smug satisfaction. She touched his cheeks, running her fingertips across the slight hollow beneath them and then to his chin, trying to decide which part of his bone structure she liked best.

The parts below the neck were just as marvelous. She explored him with her hands, over the hard rounded muscle on his upper arms, the broad expanse of pectorals down to abdominals, then back up along his waist and stopping at the faint ridges of his ribcage.

He wasn't grotesquely thin. He carried more meat and muscle than the marathon runner she had once dated, but he could stand to put on a few more pounds. She wondered if there was a way to get him to stop torturing Thor by starving himself. Still moody and temperamental (she suspected he always would be), he seemed to be having a mostly steady relationship with sanity, so she knew he didn't really believe Midgard food could harm him in any way.

He watched her, a lazy sensual smile on his face. "You are so beautiful," she said.

Big mistake. His eyes narrowed and hard derision tightened his jaw. He looked away. "That's a far

cry from a compliment."

"Why? You're a beautiful man."

"Beautiful is womanly. Would you call Thor beautiful?"

"Yeah, I would." She shrugged, but figured out where he was going with this. "All the men in Asgard look like Thor?"

"The ones of note," he said bitterly, still not looking at her.

Setting her hands on his bare shoulders, she leaned toward him and said, "A few millenniums on Asgard have done a serious mind-fuck on you." His attention wandered back to her. She sat up, picked up his hand and drew it over her right breast, down her side and left it to rest on the swell of her hip. "*This* is womanly." Next she gestured down at him. "That isn't."

"You cannot understand-"

"I understand plenty." She plunked her hands back on his shoulders. Her hair spilled down toward his face. "Who designed the fabulous shining buildings of Asgard that Thor blabs about? The gardens?" He opened his mouth, but she answered for him. "Artists, architects, craftspeople. Folks with smarts, right?"

"And magic," he said.

"If it wasn't for people with brains, Thor, Odin and the rest would be living in mud huts and shitting in the dirt." A smile twitched on his mouth and she watched him push it away. "You've got brains and you're beautiful. Here, on this humble branch of your world tree thingy, good looking men come in more flavors than muscle-bound and blond."

"The Aesir value the warrior-"

"We do that too, but it usually isn't the warrior who designs the bombs and guns."

"Tony Stark?"

"Tony's a nerd with boss weaponry. There's only one Tony." She bent farther, her face inches from his. "And only one you." She kissed his forehead. Something moved inside her, literally. She was still around him like a tight sheath. Wiggling her hips, she did the forehead to forehead thing and he grinned and pushed his hips upward.

Yeah. He was still good to go.

This time he let her dictate the pace, unhurried, as his fingers feathered exquisite touches over her skin which seemed to have instantly grown millions more nerves. Darcy bit her lower lip, concentrating on his face as she did a little bit of science on him, trying to find the point, that perfect angle that made his eyes widen and lose focus, expression full of boyish surprise. She had found several perfect moves when his patience gave out. He pulled her down and took one of her nipples into his hot, wet mouth, his hips pounding against hers hard, but without the underlying ferocity of before.

When they finished, he flipped her onto her back and slipped out of her, his leaving making her gasp. He hadn't hurt her, but it had been a while since she'd been with anyone and she was already a little sore.

Flopping on the bed, on his side, he pulled her into his arms. His sigh moved along her back.

"Sighing? Was it that bad? Icky mortal sex?"

He growled. "It was a sigh of contentment, silly girl." Lips touched her shoulder, followed by teeth as he nipped her lightly. "Mortal, yes, 'icky,' no."

"Just crass and..." she couldn't remember the rest exactly, "with a big mouth."

"Your best attributes," he casually fondled a breast, "among others." Another long sigh followed and she could feel his breathing beginning to slow. On the nightstand, the lizard was upside down and unconscious again, which was good because she didn't like the idea of the pervy reptile turning her and Loki into its personal peep show. She eyed the rose, which was getting a little threadbare and wondered if he could get her another. That question would have to wait, because apparently even immortal men liked a snooze *apres* sex. The hand on her breast twitched and then relaxed and she could hear his breathing fall into the familiar at-sleep rhythm.

Darcy closed her eyes, safe in his arms, buzzy with post-coital bliss.

Yeah. *Contentment*.



## Chapter 22

### CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Morning arrived like a thief, stealing the comfortable ease of slipping into and around a lover and leaving in its place the creeping awareness that things might be about to get complicated.

Darcy was sitting up, watching, with a measure of irritation, Loki sleep. They had spent the better part of the night conducting experiments in ecstasy on each other and in the aftermath her hip ached. Which did absolutely nothing to diminish her need to continue their research, now at 7:30 in the morning.

Her partner in sexy science, black hair in scrumptious disarray, a faint smile still on his face, was in his coma-like sleep, and otherwise useless. The moonlight had been traded out for bright morning sunlight; the chirping cricket for the deep bass thud-boom-thud from a passing car's stereo, and the caw-caw-caw of a crow.

At least Darcy assumed it was crow. Given her current bed mate, she thought it worth checking. She slipped out of bed, put on her glasses and pushed her fingers between the blinds. There were three crows - did three count as a "murder?" - hopping around some small, fuzzy dead thing on the road, looking like short, black-feathered shamans conferring last rites on the dead. Definitely crows. Even she could tell the difference. Crows were to ravens what...well, Loki was to Thor, the scrawnier little brothers. She felt a small sense of relief at this. There were already enough people spying on her and Loki.

With one last long look to make sure the roadkill wasn't anyone she knew--like Inkblot--she headed for the bathroom. Pausing at the torn remains of her favorite sleeping T-shirt, she picked up his black shirt instead. It was totally cliché, she knew, wearing a guy's shirt, but she slipped it on anyway. The fabric, thin as linen, but with the heft and texture of velvet, slid deliciously over her skin. It hung midway down her thighs and the too-long sleeves fell over her knuckles. Biting her lower lip, she cast one last look at him, feeling a giddy girlish wave of pleasure, and left the room.

This morning the view from the bathroom mirror was of an outdoor, seaside shower, the kind often found in summer homes. Beyond the wide showerhead on a tall pipe, white gulls rode a steady coastal breeze over a gray green sea.

When she opened the cabinet door, the changing angle gave her a longer view down an empty beach. Taking out a small round plastic container, she popped it open, pushed out a pill and took it. Now that she actually had a sex life again, she had to be extra careful about not skipping pills. An out-of-work supervillain and barely competent research assistant were no doubt a match made in parenting hell. As in *Lord of the Flies*, with magic and a snarky attitude.

Her usual craving for a morning ride or run missing, she dampened the parts of her hair that stuck up at crazy angles, ran a comb through it, and then went back to bed.

Not surprisingly, Loki was exactly where she'd left him. Back in bed, she propped herself on one elbow and studied him. The dark half circles under his eyes had faded to faint smudges, but the slight imperfection conferred humanity on the pale, angular perfection of his face. She touched her index and middle fingers to the thin, fragile skin under his eyes and wondered what he looked like under the illusion.

A few months before, in the evening, after Loki had disappeared to his lair outside, Jane had asked

Thor about the real Loki. Thor had been telling another Asgard story and the topic had wandered to frost giants.

"But Loki looks like you," observed Jane, "he's not blue."

Darcy, who was sitting on the couch, texting a friend, and mostly ignoring the two lovebirds, looked up in time to see the discomfort on Thor's face. "It is an illusion, crafted by Odin," explained Thor, "but one that Loki has made no attempt to circumvent."

Jane paused, one finger tapping the edge of her iPad lightly. "Can you blame him?" she asked. Thor met her eyes, expression thoughtful.

"Wait?" said Darcy. "Did you say 'blue?' Mad Science is blue, like...an Avatar Na'vi?"

Thor had paused a beat and then said, resolutely, "Yes," in a tone that meant the reference had rocketed past him at light speed but he didn't care to admit to his ignorance.

The concept of a blue Loki didn't bother Darcy at all. In fact, it kind of turned her on, but then again, at the moment, everything about him - the shape of his shoulder, the angle of his forehead, the way his dark eyelashes lay against his skin, the sound of his breathing - made her burn for him.

And now she'd had him and a part of her wondered what she was going to do with him (besides the obvious naked-fun answer). Did her answer even matter when the man in question was a creature of myth and magic? Could he really ever belong to her?

He called her his friend so presumably this was more than a one-night hookup, but she also knew his main goal was to be anywhere but here. The invite to Loki's big event--Get unattached from Thor and get the hell out of Puente Antiguo--probably didn't include the line "Plus-one."

The thought of Loki flitting off, never to be seen again, to do whatever he wanted in some other universe struck her like a knife to the heart. She flopped onto her back, and closed her eyes, which only made the scent of him on the shirt, in her bed, all the more potent. When he went away, that would be all she had left.

*It's just sex, just a bit of fun like he'd say. Live in the now, in the now...*

The bed shuddered as he did the same, a tremor moving along his long body; he muttered something in his sleep. He turned on his side, hand touching her arm. His fingers clenched on her flesh, and then he reached out, arm snaking around her waist, clutching her to him. A second shudder ran through him and his embrace tightened painfully before relaxing as he passed into dreamless sleep.

*In the now, in the now...*

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When she awoke the second time, it was to Loki watching her. Both were still under the covers, though he was on his elbows, over her. Cool air from the swamp cooler touched her face, but the heat of their bodies pooled under the bedclothes, warmth lying against her thighs and chest.

She smiled sleepily up at him. "Loki. Hey."

He blinked, looking almost startled, and then smiled back, a hint of relief in the expression. "You are wearing my shirt."

"You ruined mine."

"That wasn't a garment. It was a polishing rag with delusions of grandeur." He cupped her breast, pushing the velvety soft fabric over her slightly sore nipple. "I like this."

"My breast? Of course you do, you're a guy, a straight guy."

"Hmm, that too." He bent his head to nuzzle the spot between her breasts. "I like you in my shirt, making it yours," he moved over her like water, lips taking hers briefly, "while I make you mine." His hard need pressed against her thigh, but he seemed to enter through her eyes first.

Lifting her hands to his face, she drew her fingertips past his hairline and over his scalp, feeling the shape of his skull beneath. He fit himself tightly inside her and the world began to shrink to just the little space that they occupied.

Her brain still fuzzy with the remains of sleep, the boundary between him and her blurred, and she sank into his careful rhythm. Their lovemaking was uncomplicated, framed around the place where she took him into her and the almost nonsexual touches of their bodies elsewhere.

Their finish was a quiet crescendo and she held him over her, unwilling to relinquish him just yet. After a few minutes Loki began to occupy himself with the spot behind her right ear and down her neck, leaving hot little kisses on her sweat dampened skin. Somewhere in the house a door shut.

That sound was followed by a knock on her door. "Darcy?" said Thor's voice. "Loki?"

Loki made a noise that was half growl and groan. He rose to his elbows just as Thor merrily opened the door and strode into the room. "Have you seen--?"

"At least he knocked," said Loki, dryly. He rolled off Darcy and glowered at his brother. "Get out, Thor."

Thor was staring at Darcy with a bewildered expression of male interest. She followed his line of sight to where most of her right side was out of the covers, Loki's shirt pushed up showing a long expanse of thigh and part of her butt. With another growl, Loki snatched the edge of the sheet and yanked it sideways to cover the view.

"Do they know where--?" Jane poked her head in the doorway. "What's going on?" Her brown eyes went from Thor to Loki and Darcy. "Oh," she said, noting Loki's bare chest and the unmistakable Asgard embroidery on the Darcy's "new" shirt.

Thor drew himself up to his full height and frowned sternly at his brother. "You swore you would not do this, take her maidenhead."

"My...what?" said Darcy.

Loki nodded, trademark innocent expression making an appearance. "And I've held to my oath," he said, almost regally.

Confused, Darcy looked back and forth at the two brothers. Then she got it. "Thor, the unicorns stopped following me home junior year in high school." Because he wasn't going to get the time reference, she explained, "Years ago."

"Oh," said Thor. Unicorns he understood. His gaze went to Jane. Like a big, blond Tower of Pisa, he leaned slightly away from her, no doubt because she was now laying a pile of stink eye on him.

"What difference does *that* make?" snapped Jane. "If Darcy's not a virgin, that makes it okay for your conniving brother to use her? Because that's what he's doing."

"He, I, we, she...uh," stammered Thor. "He should not...but if...I..."

"You should probably stop talking right now," suggested Darcy to Thor. Her next comment was directed at Jane. "Ever stop to think that I'm using Loki? It's not everyday a girl like me gets to play doctor with a Norse god." Loki raised an eyebrow at that.

Jane pressed her lips together. "Come on, Thor." She took Thor's hand and dragged him out of the room, shutting the door behind them.

"Maidenhead?" said Darcy, eyebrows raised high. "Boy, you've got some 'splainin' to do."

Loki smiled smugly. "Thor, no doubt at Jane's behest, confronted me a few months ago. He asked that I not take advantage of this home's hospitality, in particular, not despoil fair maiden."

Darcy pulled a face. "Were we even getting along at the time?"

"I had not turned you into an insect," he said cheerfully. "Thor, fool that he is, probably told Jane that I must carry some fondness in my heart for you, as you yet had four, not six limbs." His agile face took on the appearance of hurt. "Jane, who doesn't trust me, took that to mean I might-"

"Seduce her research assistant. Big leap, Jane." Or not. "And you told Thor I was un-despoiled and maiden-ly?"

Still terribly self-satisfied, Loki said, "No. Thor told Thor that you were a maiden. I assume he based this on your youth. Thinking it would keep me from taking you to my bed, he had me swear that I would not take your maidenhead."

Darcy considered this for a moment. "How'd you know I wasn't?" She couldn't remember talking about former lovers around him.

"I cannot remember much about my romantic exploits," bitterness edged his voice, "but I don't recall an attraction to quivering, inexperience innocents who would bleed in my bed, and I was certainly drawn to you." He shrugged. "You have always seemed too self-assured, too confident in your womanhood to be a completely untouched. And, at the time, I was not ready to concede to my attraction to you. It was a harmless oath."

A car horn honked in the distance and they both lapsed into silence. "When you spoke of your nightmare, I knew for certain."

Darcy nodded stiffly. "Does it matter? I mean, it sounds like Asgard is pretty old school about some of that stuff."

He looked at her out of the corner of his eye. "This isn't Asgard, and I have had many lovers. I cannot begrudge you a few stupid boys. They are not even worth my jealousy."

*And if you make it back to Asgard?* Climbing out of bed, she smacked the question down and repeated her litany: *Live in the now, in the now, in the now.*

He was sitting up, the sheet and comforter at his waist, sunlight striking the pale muscled expanse of his back down to his buttocks. Her breath caught at the sight and she remembered a married friend who said that after a while the novelty of naked wore off. Deep down, Darcy suspected her friend was right, but at the moment she found the idea inconceivable. Which made the thought of

his leaving hurt all the more. Her skin tingled as he dropped a long sultry look over her, eyes lingering on her legs.

"My boobs are up here," she said, wincing at the squeak in her voice.

"Indeed." His gaze remained on her legs. "They are lovely but not your best feature."

"Really?"

"Your thighs are a magnificent deception."

"My thighs?" She ran and biked to keep them from becoming fat's favorite hangout, but didn't think of them as being terribly attractive.

He licked his lips and her knees turned to jelly. "They are composed of perfect, soft, feminine curves and yet beneath lies muscle, supple and strong. As much as I dislike confinement, your thighs are a trap I go to readily."

Darcy stared at him like a deer in headlights, her plan to march out of the room evaporating in the sexy heat of his words. In the now, indeed. She took two steps and pounced on him.

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An hour later, they were sitting on the couch, both damp and smelling of shampoo and soap. Darcy still wore his shirt, the sleeves rolled up to her forearm, and a pair of khaki shorts. Loki was back in Asgard-lite and flipping through a book that would have been at home on the set of a horror movie. It had a cracked, black leather cover with faded, creepy runes embossed on the spine and cover. The yellowing pages were covered in dense rows of runes and had a disappointing lack of scary illustrations. He said he was looking for something related to the murders, but was evasive about exactly what.

Darcy turned on her phone and checked her messages. There was one from her brother, asking her advice on a birthday gift for his wife. She replied, reminding him that Anette was the mother of two small children and what she needed was a break, like maybe a long afternoon at a spa.

The phone buzzed in her hand, Sean sending her a text: "Fury returned your pet immortal?"

"Yes," she answered. A glance at Loki showed that the darkness shadowing his eyes was nearly gone. "In almost mint condition."

"Almost? The Hulk mop the floor with him again?"

"No," she replied a little guiltily, remembering her squeaky toy comment. "He got a little scuffed while playing nice."

"Nice? We talking about the same immortal? Skinny, black hair. Likes mischief?"

*Skinny, but cut.* "That's the one. I think he's getting his memories back."

"Is he? Good for him. Maybe now he'll help you find the murderer."

"Tired of almost getting blown to pieces?"

"Yeah. I work best fully assembled. And I don't like pain."

Loki lifted his gaze from the book, staring across the room, lost in thought. "You'll be glad to

know, L's on the case right now," she typed back, eyes on the book. Either that or he was searching for a recipe for the ultimate Asgard cheesecake.

Sean said goodbye and Darcy set the phone down just as the lizard scrambled onto the coffee table. It skirted around the phone and made a bee line for Darcy's empty cereal bowl. Picking up the box of cereal, she shook out a couple of pieces and dropped them on the table, where the lizard immediately vacuumed them up.

"Unlike you, it eats everything," Darcy said to Loki.

Loki leaned forward, eyeing his creation. "It's female."

"How can you tell?"

Moving so fast his hand was blur, he grabbed the creature just in front of its hind legs and lifted it toward his face. Skinny striped body twisting like a snake, it struggled and then opened its mouth, threatening fire. Face otherwise passive, Loki arched an eyebrow and the lizard shut its tiny maw, but still looked pugnacious.

"It's one of your native species. They are all female."

"You mutated a real lizard?"

"Not intentionally," he said somewhat bitterly. His fingers parted abruptly and the lizard fell to the floor where it bounced twice on the carpet. Landing on its back, it flipped over, looking dazed.

"And you wonder why it, *she* hates you," said Darcy, bending down and offering her hand to the little creature. Loki watched the lizard march up her arm, a faint smirk on his mouth.

"What's that?" asked Jane. Darcy turned, finding her standing behind the couch, focused on the book in Loki's hand. Thor paused a few feet away, eyes also on the book.

"A grimoire," said Darcy, "Or so he says. Either that or a collection of naughty limericks."

Thor moved closer and peered over Loki's shoulder. "No. It is a grimoire. Erotic limericks would have accompanying illustrations." This earned him a two-way questioning smirk from Jane and Darcy, but typically oblivious, he asked, "Is there coffee cake?"

"Yeah," said Darcy. "We picked some up on the way home yesterday. Middle shelf. Fridge."

Jane sat on the loveseat and was soon joined by a chipper Thor and his midday snack. Darcy eyed the Thor-sized slice of cake on the plate--really, half the cake--and wondered if they could trade him in for a pony. A pony would be cheaper to feed.

He offered the cake to Jane and she tore off a small chunk and ate it. Her hair hung loose around her face, the sun from the window picking golden highlights from the brown. Even dressed in a cream-colored T-shirt and faded jean shorts, she possessed an elegant, refined beauty, the kind that would totally be at home in Asgard.

Darcy glanced down at herself and suspected that crass and miles-from-refined wouldn't work out that well in Asgard's hallowed halls. *Wow. Insecure, much?* Where had that come from? She glanced at Loki. Right. Sex with a demi-god.

Demi-god? What did that mean, anyway? Half god. What was the other half? Were Thor and Loki the cheaper versions of a real deity? Fifty-percent genuine god and the rest inexpensive fillers?

She was saved from any sillier thoughts by Jane, who asked Loki, "So have you remembered anything new? Like why the killer's magic seems so familiar to you?" Her tone was a touch demanding, and Loki responded by aiming a hard blast of irritation at her.

Jane sighed and looked at the cake on Thor's plate. "Neither Darcy nor I want to get locked up underground every time you and Thor leave town."

"Yeah," agreed Darcy. "If Jane isn't forced to go home once a day, the Fish Bowl becomes the only environment she can survive in."

Jane smiled wryly and nodded. "Spending that much time in the lab isn't good for my research. It's so easy to disappear in the work, but I get my best ideas when I'm here, my mind on other things."

"I haven't remembered anything specific," said Loki, "but there are questions in my mind, queries that need an answer." He shifted his stare from Jane to Thor.

Thor paused, a large forkful of cake nearly at his mouth. "Questions?" Loki said nothing, watching Thor intently.

When Loki's silence stretched too long, Darcy prodded, "Here. I'll get you started. 'Where,' 'when,' 'who' or 'how' are handy ways to start."

Rather than speaking, Loki inclined his head slightly, eyes slowly panning the extent of the living room. Thor and Darcy stared at him blankly.

Jane, however, quickly figured out what he meant. "I thought you've been frying all the bugs in the house."

"Fury and I had a conversation," was Loki's annoyingly oblique answer.

Darcy snorted. "I don't think growling counts as a conversation."

"He suggested, in light of the killer's growing boldness, that I not tamper with the listening devices."

"All of them?" said Darcy, thinking of the erotic radio show that she and he may have put on last night. She puffed out a sigh of relief at his sly smile and subtle shake of his head. On her shoulder, the lizard rubbed a clawed paw over its face like a cat. She watched the little reptile and wondered if she should mention its new habit of barbecuing bugs.

"Loki asked...," began Thor, his mouth full of coffee cake. Chewing rapidly, he swallowed. "He asked why Fury did not question Sean regarding the murder of the third man."

"Sean didn't kill anyone," said Darcy, irritably.

"And you know this, how?" said Loki.

"Because..." Darcy sighed. "he's Sean, accountant. He wields the power of the spreadsheet. He doesn't even believe in magic, not entirely. Anyway, he was in San Diego when the last guy was killed."

"That is true," agreed Loki. "SHIELD confirmed that he took a flight from Albuquerque to Phoenix, then another to San Diego. This was verified by surveillance camera footage at all three airports. He also was seen on security feeds at a bank and a fast food restaurant in San Diego, accompanied by his sister."

"Wow," said Darcy, "SHIELD *is* big brother."

Loki shrugged. "His alibi is solid. Ours, less so."

"SHIELD still suspects you two?" Jane rolled her eyes, incredulous. "At this point, even I don't think Loki did it."

"I am the only known sorcerer in the area and my recent approach to dealing with mortals was less than benevolent." Loki turned his gaze on Darcy. "As my one," he paused, "friend, Darcy is shadowed by corresponding suspicion."

"Like Darcy said, you have no motive," said Jane, helping herself to another small chunk of coffee cake.

Loki gave her a wicked smile, no teeth, just mischief in his eyes. "What better motive than the incarceration of one of Earth's mightiest heroes? Where I go, Thor goes."

"If you want to get locked up, why not just off somebody in plain sight?" Darcy said, handing another piece of cereal to the lizard on her shoulder.

"I am Loki. I revel in the game."

"From commander of an alien army to serial killer in the armpit of New Mexico. Your game got lame." Darcy shook her head. "Yeah, I'm a little biased, but I don't buy that theory." She rose and pointed at the door. "We've been gone from the house for a week. We should check out the property, make sure no one stole anything from Tony's museum of techno-junk."

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A couple of weeks into September and the desert sun still bathed the parched landscape in unwavering heat, but the lazy breeze that played the wind chimes that hung on the front porch now carried the cooler touch of fall. Next door, their neighbor, Carlos was on his roof, fiddling with one of three swamp coolers on his U-shaped trailer home. Seeing the four, he waved absently and went back to energetically whacking something inside the cooler with a hammer.

They paused at the foot of the stairs. Thor looked at Darcy, a question in his eyes, but Loki immediately headed toward the east. It seemed as good a direction as any so Darcy and Jane shrugged and followed him.

Loki strode on ahead of everyone, tall, imposing and also looking strangely comfortable in black leather despite the heat. Each of his steps was filled with a confidence she had never seen before. She stopped, knowing that in that strong stride was the return of the real Loki, whatever that entailed. Unhappily aware that this was another sign of his impending departure, she faced the street.

About a block away, the breeze twisted and writhed and turned itself into a dust devil, churning a coil of tan dust up toward the sky. Darcy paused to watch as it spun across a vacant lot, carrying sand and a white plastic bag a few hundred feet in the air before losing momentum and uncoiling to the earth like a dying cobra.

The sense of being watched poked at her and she turned, finding Loki standing by the storage shed, his attention on her. Thor and Jane reach him a second later and followed his gaze back to her. With a shrug and grin, she hurried to catch up.

Loki flicked a couple of fingers at the padlock on the door and it popped open with a quick click.



He entered the little building, his sharp gaze moving over the space before he leveled his focus on Thor, who remained outside with the others. Darcy started to quip that she didn't literally mean that they should check Stark's high-tech yard sale crap, but Loki's grim expression killed the comment in her throat.

He whispered something and made a languid motion with his hands. Magic tickled Darcy's skin and she swallowed, an instinctive reflex to the sudden pressure in her ears. Jane must have felt it too, because she put a hand to her right ear, and a line formed between her brow along with a question on her lips.

Loki spoke. "The one who brought us to Midgard, he who opened a path between realms, what was his name, *brother*?" Darcy sighed at the cutting bitterness in the last word, but let it go because the question was interesting.

Thor glanced nervously at Jane and then dropped his gaze to his feet. "I cannot tell you."

"Cannot or will not?" Loki's voice was soft but his eyes shone with dark intensity.

Thor met his brother's eyes. "Cannot. I do not know."

"You took the aid of a sorcerer powerful enough to travel the hidden pathways without knowing his identity? That is rash, even for you." His voice brimmed with contempt. "And how did you find this man?"

Thor shrank under Loki's scrutiny, and Darcy felt sorry for him. "He found me," the blond prince said reluctantly.

"He found you," Loki repeated. He glanced at Darcy and shook his head. "Of course." Taking a step forward, he leaned, forearm against the doorframe, shoulders sagging with exasperated disgust. "And this didn't strike you as the slightest bit suspicious?"

"Yes," replied Thor, straightening and regaining some of his princely bearing. "But it did not matter. I had visited your cell, seen what had been done to you." He shot Jane and Darcy long glances as if appealing to them for support. "His identity was of no import, only setting you free mattered."

"This is freedom?" Loki said, heatedly.

"Would you rather lay bleeding in that cell?" retorted Thor, his deep voice rising.

Darcy lifted her hands and gave a couple of claps. "Nice show guys, but wrong audience." She jerked her head toward where Carlos still argued, now with a big red pipe wrench, with his reticent swamp cooler.

Taking his arm from the doorframe, Loki straightened, eyes on Darcy, a muscle in his jaw twitching "What," he said carefully, attention still on her, "was the payment for this sorcerer's service?"

"He took no payment," said Thor with a tight expression on his face that jumped up and down and yelled, "Lie."

"Even Darcy is a better liar," observed Loki, echoing her thoughts. "What did you promise him?"

Thor sighed. "I asked him why he would want to help you. His answer was that he wished to right an injustice."

"The price?" Loki prodded.

Thor squirmed like a boy whose mom had just found his sticky-paged Playboy collection under the mattress. "He said he would collect a good turn at a later date."

"Wow!" Jane stared at Thor, wide-eyed. "Physics, not mythology is my expertise, but even I know that's a bad bargain."

"You think Thor's interdimensional travel agent is the same person who killed Max and Andy?" asked Darcy.

"No," Thor interrupted Loki's response. "To what purpose? The sorcerer came to me, out of concern for you, Loki. Why go to such lengths to free you from Asgard's dungeons, only to see you thrown in another here on Midgard?"

"A game?" said Loki. "A change of playing field. Perhaps he preferred the 'freedom' of Midgard to unfold his scheme."

"You mean the murderer is another Asgardian?" said Jane. She and Darcy exchanged an "Oh shit" look.

"If Thor's helpful friend and the killer are the same, then, yes, possibly. The freezing spell is simple enough. The rare mortal with magical ability could manage such a minor working. But the ability to navigate between realms requires centuries of study and practice."

"So, immortal," said Darcy. The light tug of the black fabric on her shoulder signaled the lizard's trek down her arm. She crouched and let it down onto the ground. Her gaze followed a line up Loki's legs, body and finally settled on his face, over his clenched jaw and up to the barely controlled rage in his eyes.

"This is your doing," he said to Thor. "You could not leave well enough alone."

Thor didn't retreat this time. "Well enough? Brother, I did this for you. Whatever you may think of this place, it is one step closer to your freedom. Do not think that I am blind to your plans. I know you seek the means to break Odin's spell." He paused, swallowed and continued, "And when you break the bond between us, you will run as you always do and you will be free of me." Darcy could hear the hurt in Thor's voice and it vibrated in perfect harmony with the ache in her heart.

"You did not do this for me. You did it for Thor," snapped Loki. "Everything you do is for your own acclaim." He took a step toward Thor. "And now your latest indulgence has killed at least three mortals and threatens Darcy...and your precious Jane."

Thor looked at Darcy and then Jane, a touch of guilt on his face. Jane gave him a smile and squeezed his hand. He returned her smile sadly and then faced his brother. "You are correct, Loki. If not for my stupid blundering, we might never have found ourselves in the company of Jane and Darcy."

That statement was oddly subtle for Thor, but effective. Loki winced and for a millisecond his full attention was on Darcy, face painfully young and vulnerable. Then that Loki was gone and Darcy wondered if she had imagined it. The impending arrival of some absolutely horrible and cruel comment was announced in the concentrated anger pulsing from his body.

"AAAaargh!" At the scream, Darcy looked around, only to face everyone else's querulous looks and the recognition that she was the source. Carlos continued repairing his swamp cooler with extreme violence, apparently because Loki's spell somehow masked sound.

Darcy shrugged. Sex had been a great way to release tension, but now watching the man she *liked* at lot tormenting his too-devoted-to-be-true brother stretched her nerves tighter than piano wire.

She stood up and said to Loki, pointing at Thor. "No, he's not as smart as you - Who is? - and he goes where ever his emotions lead, but he's not stupid. Lose the condescending 'tude and ask him the same question again. I bet he might remember something useful." Hot sunlight pouring down on his tall, black leather clad frame, Loki seemed about to boil over, but he simply glared at her, keeping his thoughts to himself, which was good, since the stuff in his head would probably get him kicked out of her bed forever.

To Jane, Darcy said, "These two have more melodrama than a Lifetime TV movie." Reaching out, she took Jane's hand and started toward the road. "Let's walk, you and me."

Jane resisted at first, big brown eyes mostly on Thor, with a few nervous glances at Loki. "But..."

"They'll be all right." Darcy gave Jane a hard tug and the worried physicist followed slowly. "Ask him. Again," Darcy repeated to Loki.

Not that she expected him to, but Loki didn't take her advice. "Once again," he said, sending a scathing glance at Thor, "I am left to repairing the damage you've done." He turned on his heel and retreated into the shed.

Jane gave her a concerned look and Darcy responded, "They're better off without an audience."

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As pets went, the lizard was some kind of wonderful. Darcy's brother had four pet geckos when he was a kid, but all they ever did was lay around under a sun lamp in a tiny aquarium, until a year later, they all died of boredom. (Darcy always imagined they'd had a suicide pact.) This lizard was like a teeny, boob-obsessed, smarter-than-average, scaly dog. It seemed to be subsisting easily on table scraps and whatever it could scrounge. As she and Jane walked along the side of the road, it scampered nearby, darting in and out of clumps of sagebrush and tumbleweeds and then scaling the short wall of tires along the front of Carlos's property.

Just past Carlos's house, Jane asked, "Did you and Loki really have sex?" and immediately turned a vivid shade of crimson.

"Yeah and it was awesome." Darcy grinned at Jane's discomfort.

"Like, real sex?" She shoved her hands awkwardly in the front pockets of her jean shorts.

"There's a fake kind?"

Jane's face was now a shade of red that may have been borderline unhealthy. "I mean, the kind that gets you pregnant."

"I'm on the pill." She cocked her head at Jane. "You preggers?"

"No!" They were passing the Richards's place and Darcy was glad to see that Rocket and Meteor were in the house since she didn't have any treats. "Remember that conversation where Thor let it slip that he'd had sex with other mortal women?" asked Jane.

"I'm surprised he didn't end up sleeping on the couch," said Darcy with a laugh. "Did he tell you that you were the only one?"

"Not exactly," she said. "We had sex, real sex, for the first time after his confession."

"No way," protested Darcy. "You two have been going at it like-

"No, we haven't." Her face, which had started to go back to a normal shade, reddened again. "We did...things, but not that. At first, I thought it was kind of charming, him being a gentleman. Then, it got old." Darcy nodded in understanding. Night after night with a model of male perfection in your room was the definition of sexual tension overload.

"When I'd try for, you know, more, he'd say he didn't want to hurt me. I asked if this was about me being mortal and he," Jane frowned, "he said yes, but looking back, it was obvious he was lying."

"So what was the real story. Performance anxiety?" she quipped.

Jane laughed quietly. "I think it has something to do with him being a prince and expectations for the women in his life. He doesn't want me to be perceived as just a fling. I guess it's kind of flattering since his concerns mean he sees us as going somewhere..."

Jane lapsed into silence and Darcy's response took a minute or two because the conversation was revving up her own anxieties. "Going where?" she asked. "To the place where you argue over guest lists and whether the hors d'oeuvres should be cocktail weenies or salmon on toast?" Then they both laughed at the idea of cocktail weenies at an Asgard party.

They walked in silence past Mrs. Tapia's house, the soundtrack provided by the multiple wind chimes on the old woman's porch. Several new silk flowers, red poppies, waved cheerfully in the breeze where they were wrapped around the chain link fence.

Jane broke the conversational lull. "Please tell me you haven't gotten caught up in Thor's silly fantasy."

"He's a flying man in a red cape. Thor *is* a fantasy," replied Darcy. Jane groaned and Darcy made an apologetic face. "Sorry. I don't know what you're talking about."

Jane fiddled with her hair, a sign of exasperation. "The fantasy that he can get back the Loki he remembers from long ago, the kinder, gentler Loki. Thor's convinced that by getting him away from Asgard, away from all the things that drove him nuts, he'll get that Loki back."

"That Loki is gone and so is the Thor that used to hang out with him." Darcy's voice had a snappish edge and she realized she sounded like Loki. Well, if she did, it was with good reason. Jane eyed her worriedly, obviously put off by Darcy's tone.

"Do you remember when you were fifteen, Jane?"

"Fifteen? Why?" Jane looked at Darcy who simply cocked her head at her. "I guess. Yeah. I was a sophomore in high school."

"And is Jane, now-Jane, the same person as fifteen-year-old Jane?"

"Yes-no. No." Jane smiled. "I'm a very different person." With a nod, she added, "Centuries of living would change a person even more."

"Thor needs to work on connecting with now-Loki, not a ghost."

Ahead of them, the lizard stopped and then rose high on its legs, alert. The cause, another lizard, slightly larger, crept out of the shade of a sagebrush. Jane stopped, eyes on the two reptiles. "And

who is now-Loki?" she asked.

Darcy also watching the reptilian drama, took a moment to consider her answer. "I think Thor's right about one thing. All the mess here in town and in New York, was the result of Loki having a major break with reality."

Jane looked dubious, but Darcy forged on. "Bear with me. I have a theory. Okay, more like a hypothesis, yes, I have paid attention to some of your science-y stuff." This earned her a grin from Jane. "I think Loki's been struggling with some kind of mental illness for decades, or centuries. Being Loki, he was pretty good at covering it up. And it wouldn't have done him much good to ask for help because Asgard, the land of happy, shiny, perfect people, is probably worse than America for dealing with mental health problems."

On the ground, the two lizards circled each other in the sand in herky-jerky reptile movements. "So you're saying he was already kind of unstable--"

"--and then he learned his dad was the blue, freezy version of Darth Vader," Darcy made a swooshing motion with her hand, "he took a dive off the sanity board into the deep end of crazy."

Darcy's pet lunged at the other lizard and they rolled briefly in an irate gray knot and then separated. She couldn't tell if they were having angry sex or fighting.

"You know," said Jane, "even if you're right, this doesn't make me feel any better about you two. This just means my friend is falling in love with a crazy person."

"Love? Who said anything about love?" She held up a hand. "And only I get to call him crazy, because when I say it, it's with," she almost said the I-word, "warm fuzzies."

The two lizards were entangled again, rolling back and forth in the sand. Darcy faced Jane and said, "Evil's forever. Crazy you can cure."

Jane's throat moved as she swallowed, preparing to say something. Darcy got a reprieve from whatever it was when a red van cruised up the road and passed them. This time she recognized it instantly from the burned out barn down the road. An African American man with salt and pepper gray hair was driving, a younger Hispanic man in the passenger side. Whoever was paying for the job must have been forking over some major scratch to get the crew out on a Sunday.

"I'm sorry, Darcy," began Jane, pulling her hair over her shoulder, fingers entangling nervously with hunks of brown. "I know it's none of my business--"

"Friends get up in each others' business," broke in Darcy with a crooked smile and shrug.

Jane sighed. "But even if he can get better, Loki scares me. He's not nice, not like Sean. He's arrogant, manipulative and immortal."

"Immortal?" Darcy threw back her head and laughed. "Your boyfriend? The one with the Angry Birds addiction? He's been twenty-five since the time when the Egyptians were drawing up the plans for the pyramids."

Jane gave Darcy a frowny smile. "Yes, but my immortal doesn't have old enemies showing up and leaving dead bodies on the doorstep."

Jane had a point, but Darcy didn't want to admit it. She glanced down at the lizards, who were back to circling, pausing to bob threateningly at each other. The larger lizard rushed the smaller who skittered back. Flames erupted from its mouth, licking the sand and a patch of yellowed grass. In

seconds, one small flame bred several more that began to devour the bone dry grass.

Jane and Darcy both moved forward and began stomping out the tiny blaze. The wild lizard fled at their approach.

"That thing's going to set the desert on fire," grumbled Jane.

Leaving Jane to play firefighter, Darcy bent and held out her hand. "Come on, before you make like Loki and destroy the neighborhood." Fiery protector back on her shoulder, Darcy stood.

Jane nudged the burned grass with her running shoe, getting a black smudge on white leather. Looking up, her gaze settled on the lizard. "It really is a cigarette lighter on legs."

"She, not it," corrected Darcy as a name came to mind. "Bic, like the lighter. Her name is Bic."

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The nightmare that awoke her that night wasn't hers, literally.

Darcy had spent most of the evening in Loki's room as he fiddled with the magic detector. He was altering the device for some secret mischief, but he'd made it known that he was interested in visiting the place where the latest corpse-sicle had been found. The four had a tentative plan to sneak out to Arnold King's place late tomorrow night.

Right after dinner, he had slunk back to his room as usual. Knowing he wanted to be alone, she'd stuck her head in the partially opened doorway, but didn't enter the room. "Whatcha working on?"

Sitting on his bed, he lifted the device in answer and then went back to tinkering.

Detecting a dismissal, she said, "K," and started to retreat.

"Have you read that one yet?" He lifted his gaze to a paperback novel on Thor's bed. "It was amusing, but felt as though, as they say here on Midgard, Koontz was 'phoning it in.'"

Darcy, who wasn't wearing her glasses, moved closer so she could see the title: *Odd Hours* by Dean Koontz. "No. I just finished *Brother Odd*." She raked her eyes over him, studying his posture. Deciding that his question was as close to an invitation as Loki could give, she made herself comfortable on the bed and started to read.

They didn't speak more than a few words in the next four hours, but she was intensely aware of his presence. From time to time, she paused from reading to watch him. Playing with science and magic summoned the ghost Loki that Thor remembered. When focused on some delicate operation, he shifted his jaw to the right, head cocked to the left. His shoulders drooped with frustration, but eyes sparkled with bright determination when something failed. (Failure usually accompanied by smoke, which set off the home's smoke detectors. "Loki!" Thor would roar from the living room. Loki would exchange a grin with Darcy, and wave his hand, shutting off the alarms' shriek.)

Overall, his demeanor vibrated with a very un-Loki-like hope.

Sitting in the same room, several feet apart, each engaged in their own activity, felt like something boring old married people might do, but she felt a heady sense of joy in the easy way they fit into one another's space.

By ten-thirty, the words on the page were turning to gibberish and not just because Koontz was spending too much time on long stretches of dialogue. Last night's naked time with the God of

Mischief had been literally divine, but all sex and no sleep threatened to make Darcy psychotic. When she left for her room and bed, he was still happily obsessed with his work.

At three a.m., the nightmare announced itself with a crushing panic. She opened her eyes, deep asleep one instant, startling awake the next. Despite her racing pulse, the usual elements of her dream, the helplessness, the choking grasp of the rope, were absent. Sitting up, she took inventory of the room. Desk, dresser, nightstand, bed. The stick insect on the lampshade glittered prettily in the moonlight. Bic, in her usual place, slept belly up. Room, sweet room. The only thing missing was a certain immortal.

Not that she was going to demand his attention if he was craving alone time, but the tightness in her chest grew as she looked across the murky gray shadows to her bedroom door. The pressure shifted to a sense of being pulled and she got up.

Watery yellow light edged his door. She knocked, waited and got no answer. Though her first impulse was to go back to her own bed, the need to see him niggled at the back of her brain. After another knock she eased open the door.

A small lamp on the dresser was the only source of light. He was asleep on his bed, still dressed. His back was to the door, legs bent and pulled toward his chest.

She had shifted her weight back onto her heels, about to turn and leave when his shoulders twitched and then shuddered. Something in the movement filled her with a sense of dread, chilly goose bumps rising on her skin. Another shudder, this time longer, started in his shoulders and moved over his body in a wave. He moaned.

"Mad Science? You okay?"

The shudder became a wrenching motion, his muscles seizing. Still on his side, he straightened to his full length and then curled in on himself like a child hiding from the monster under the bed.

"Loki." She took another step into the room.

With an agonized moan, he flipped over, facing her. His face, the curve and placement of his long limbs, were exactly like her nightmare. Only his eyes differed, opened just a crack, eyelids fluttering, whites only, no pupils showing. Red smeared the corner of his mouth to his jaw line.

His eyes shut and he went eerily still. When his eyes opened again they had that ghastly look, glassy-eyed, as if his vision had pierced an unseen veil, the lifeless gaze that scared her more than anything he could conjure when angry. A spear of icy fear shot up her back and she started to shiver. "Loki?"

"They are blind to his faults," he murmured. His eyes rolled back, leaving only spectral white. The seizures claimed him again, whipping his long limbs around like a cruel puppeteer. His flailing acquired a weird order and he flung himself awkwardly to the floor. In a disorganized scramble he moved backward, his back hitting the wall with a hard thud. His eyes were open, but filled with chaotic stew of anger and madness.

A door opened with the metallic protest of door hinges and squeak of a handle wrenched too hard, and Thor was at her side. "Wait." His deep voice was accompanied by a big hand on her upper arm. She glanced irritably at Thor, almost pointing out that she wasn't stupid. No way was she going near Loki when he wore that tear-down-the-world expression.

Then Thor was down on the floor, hands on his brother's shoulders. Loki recoiled at the touch, eyes

still not quite seeing what lay before him; his head smacked against the wall, and he struck out with his fists. Darcy flinched at ugly sound of flesh hitting flesh, but Thor paid the blows no mind.

"Loki?" said Thor. "It is I, Thor, your brother."

Loki blinked, hands still clenched in fists. Dull confusion was replaced by a flare of recognition in his eyes. He looked at Thor, apparently really seeing him and then he glanced around the room.

"Not...brother." His shoulders sagged and his head bowed, eyes on the floor. He didn't acknowledge Darcy.

She stood alone in the room, her own hands in fists. In the past, she had heard the sound of a scuffle coming from Loki's room at night. This, she now knew was what was going on; loyal Thor running to his brother's side, comforting a sibling who wanted no comfort. Her teeth chattered as the worst of her fears started to slip away, and she felt useless, an outsider, stupid mortal with no place in this drama. Except here she was, compelled by some strange force to bear witness to Loki's torments.

Thor studied his brother for a moment longer and then rose and walked past Darcy. She thought he had continued on, but then a strong hand at her back pushed her briefly towards Loki. When she turned, Thor was already leaving the room.

She settled next to Loki on the floor, back to the wall, head on his shoulder. "Bad dream?"

She felt a warm gust of air as he pressed a kiss on the top of her head. "Leave, Darcy."

"No."

"Just go."

"Nope." She worked her arms around him and hugged him tighter than she ever would an ordinary person, so hard her muscles ached with the effort. "Not going anywhere."

"Thor was right. You *were* a maiden. I have ruined you."

Darcy snort-laughed. "I've been with other men."

He twisted in her arms, pushing her back so he could look her in the eyes. "Boys. They were nothing. You were untouched, innocent—"

"One of those boys was a rapist," she said, voice flat.

"A beast, but nothing in comparison to me." He started to touch her and stopped, hand inches from her face. "I will destroy you."

"No, you won't," she said. "I'm stronger than you." Releasing him, she took his hand and kissed the palm. She contemplated the crisp, perfect symmetry of his face, seeing two Lokis: the unknowable, powerful immortal and the weary wreck of a man who once had everything and had rejected it.

"I'm stronger than you." When she spoke the words again, they came out as a kind of revelation. She eyed the blood on his mouth, finding the cause, a cut where he must have bitten his lower lip. Kissing him, she tasted the expect iron, but also a hot salty flavor.

He settled into the kiss with a resigned sigh, long fingers buried in her hair. Darcy took command of the situation, showing him with her mouth just how much she belonged at his side, letting her fingers tell him that she had strength enough for the two of them.



They made love on the floor, their movements filled with the furtive and awkward energy of two teens sneaking in the naughty while the parents were at home. She still wore his shirt and he had on most of his renaissance fair wear, the squeak of bedsprings traded for the creak of leather on metal and more leather.

Once her warm, after-sex, brain fog lifted, she decided to figure out his Asgard clothing, once and for all. Still on the floor, she sat, straddling him, trying to determine which fastener did what. Honestly, it was like a Rubik's cube in leather, metal and cloth. "This strap?" she asked.

"Yes," he said agreeably, but obviously paying no attention. His eyes were half closed, hands massaging the top of her thighs.

"Sit up," she commanded after undoing several promising buckles.

"Magic word," he said lazily.

"Please," she said with a half-hearted scowl and he sat up wearily. His face was inches from hers but she was temporarily distracted by her minor victory over his clothing. She pulled a large section of heavy leather up over his head and dropped it to the carpet.

"Loveliest body servant I have ever had." He flopped back down on his back.

"I bet you say that to all the girls," she said, getting back to the rest of leathery riddle that was his clothing. Some of it seemed superfluous, more flare than function, high fashion week in the Asgard armory.

Looking up she saw the expression on his face: confusion. "I might," he admitted.

It was so the wrong answer, but the look on his face was so adorably befuddled, that she let it slide. His hand was on her thigh but edging upward and she glanced at the open door. "We probably should close the door, because...Thor."

He smirked. "It would be educational for Thor."

"I doubt it," she said. "Thor's been around the block so many times, he's probably dizzy."

"I suspect Thor's status allows him to treat sexual conquests with the same lazy approach he takes with most other matters. His lovers are so enamored with the idea of being in Thor Odinson's bed, they make few demands." His eyes opened wide with overplayed wistfulness. "I, however, was not granted such leniency and had to hone my skills at pleasing a lover."

She started to note that Jane, having finally convinced the big lug to put out, wasn't complaining. Knowing that observation was probably futile, she instead followed a seam along his ribs, found a gap and pulled loose another strap. Seeing a pattern now, she repeated her action on his other side and at his wrists, loosening sleeves. She tugged at his collar, pulling him upright again. The remainder of the leather now off, all that remained was a shirt that matched the one she wore. "Twins," she observed, feeling like one of those nerd couples who wore matching clothes.

She rubbed her thumb over the remaining smear of blood on his chin. "Does something trigger your nightmares or do they happen randomly? You've never had any in my room."

He took a hand from her thigh, curling his slender fingers into a slow fist, eyes on his hand. "I do no suffer nightmares in your presence." Resentment lengthened his face.

Though she was largely impervious to his mood swings, this shift hurt. Darcy Lewis wasn't stupid;

she knew the resentment was directed at her and she realized why he was still in his room at three a.m. Because Loki had no intention of letting himself depend on anyone for anything, least of all Darcy and whatever relief she somehow provided against the psychic backwash that escaped his subconscious when he slept.

Because he meant to leave her.

Grief bubbled up in her chest and the embarrassing desire to do something needy and pathetic like ask if they had a future almost got the better of her. Desperate to keep it together, she wrapped her hands around his fist as if it were a cup of hot chocolate on a cold day.

*Live in the now, no past, no future.* Before, she'd never included the future in her mantra, but it had never before contained the possibility of losing someone like Loki. Curving her own fingers, she picked and pulled at his fingertips, trying to pry open his fist. *Just a bit of fun, just sex.* His hand relaxed abruptly and she almost lost her grip. Both hands clutching his, she stood and pulled. "Let's go to bed," she said casually, as though it didn't really matter if he followed her or not.

Unnatural strength pulled back. He didn't budge and the rejection in his immobility threatened to break her disinterested front. Forcing every ounce of strength into her hands, she let his hand slip from hers. Straightening her back like dancer, she lifted her foot and stepped over him, eyes set on the safe harbor of her room.

The abrupt grip on her hand threw her off balance and she waved her other arm, trying to say upright, before his firm tug was followed by the sickening sensation of falling backward. Landing in his lap, she met his still resentful stare. With little effort, he secured her in his arms and stood.

Although it was the textbook definition of needy, she grabbed a fistful of his shirt and did not let go, not even when he tucked them both into her bed, nor when he made love to her with a tenderness that contradicted his earlier resentment.

*In the now*, she thought, knuckles pressed against his unyielding strength, clutching that rumpled bit of black fabric like a lifeline. She wasn't sure if she held onto him or some part of herself.

It didn't really matter, because once again she felt herself emboldened by purpose, sliding into a role she knew well. Whether he left tomorrow, or in a week, or a year, she would be strong enough for both of them.

## Chapter 23

### CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Monday morning announced itself with the blat of trumpets and wheeze of an accordion, as Darcy's clock radio, set to a mariachi station, made the regularly scheduled racket. Awoken from a dream that seemed strikingly like a version of the nightmare, Darcy blinked at the ceiling while the singer wailed about losing his woman, his dog and his truck. (Darcy had taken three years of Spanish in high school, but her grasp of the language didn't extend beyond a mastery of expletives. She knew, however, that mariachi music was pretty much country music set to a polka beat and sung in Spanish.)

With a groan, she sat up and swatted the off button on the radio. Loki, impervious to noise, including south-of-the-border heartbreak, snoozed on. She yawned, eyes on the mechanical stick insect sitting on the lampshade and tried to piece together the fragments of the dream before they faded in the morning sun.

*The trailer house lay before her, black and white in the darkness. She was returning from a date, or shopping, or a date. She didn't know which because she was someone else watching her return, seeing herself from another consciousness, and this made perfect sense because it was a dream.*

*Through this other mind, she saw herself approach the steps and then stop as a body appeared on the porch. Prince Loki of Asgard, regal in death, dressed in various shades of green leather trimmed in gold, formal attire save for the absence of his helm.*

*This other self watched dispassionately as she stumbled up the stairs, blood on her knees, and pulled Loki's head into her lap, weeping. Then she wasn't Darcy, but instead a young woman with dusky skin and hair the color of pale sunlight. She cradled the head of a man whose face was ruined, and Darcy-not-Darcy's attention fell on the sword at his side and the distinctive black sigil carved into the center of weapon's guard. It was a fine weapon, dwarven made, a gift from her-his father.*

*The woman lifted her face skyward, her eyes black in the night, but in the daylight, they were blue, the same as Darcy's. The expression on her face was beyond grief, beyond all emotion, abject desolation. It tore at Darcy and the other person's soul because she understood this loss, and because she was the cause.*

*Seamlessly, in the manner of a dream, the woman on the porch now wore glasses and her long brown hair fell in waves toward the sharp-edged features of Loki. And then it was the fair-haired woman and dead warrior with the burned face.*

*And each time the faces changed, the watcher shook his head, guilt and grief clenching sharp-nailed fingers into his heart, because he knew what came next, the trek up the hill, the tree, the rope. It never changed, but the watcher and Darcy by default, tried to call out, but in dreams you can never really yell.*

*"Not dead," they protested, "Not dead. Not dead."*

Writing the dream down would have been more effective than committing it to memory, but that would have required either finding a pad and paper, or maybe firing up her laptop. At this hour of the morning the only thing worth that much effort was sex. Given her partner's current vegetative state - she poked his eyeball, getting no more than a feeble wince in response - that left only one

other option. A quick bike ride to keep her best features, thighs, looking great.

She left the house through the side door in the utility room because there was no space on that short flight of steps for a dead body, frozen or otherwise. The sky was postcard blue and the desert vegetation, even the dried out, brown tumbleweeds, cast in gold tones by the sunlight. Bic followed her out, but climbed atop the stairs' handrail to warm in the morning sun.

"Watch out for roadrunners," she warned, although any bird stupid enough to tangle with the reptile would end up cooked, extra crispy. At the entrance to Loki's lair, she paused, squinting into the dark interior, before heading in to get her bike. Despite the similarity to the nightmare, this last dream had been less scary and more depressing.

She was in fact, grateful for the sun on her face and the cheerful blue sky because a strong shot of daylight was the only thing that could cure the sadness left by the dream. Stopping at the Richards's front gate, she gave Rocket and Meteor distracted neck scratches, her thoughts too caught up in the mystery of her subconscious.

Had that been another psychic message from the killer or something concocted by her own brain? She had won the trifecta of nightmare repellent: mischief-making immortal in her bed, metal stick insect on the lampshade, and Loki's total house protection mojo barrier plugged into the wall socket. During the week Loki was out of town, the insect alone had been enough to keep away the horribly dream.

Darcy squinted into the sun, remembering with depressing ease the misery of her dream alter ego as he - it was a he - watched her and the mystery woman mourn the death of their men. Enveloped in this other person's consciousness, Darcy had experience the foreign taste of someone else's pain, and it had felt utterly real.

But maybe it was just her subconscious's way of dealing with the fear that her favorite supervillain would leave Puente Antiguo for someplace with a better class of breakable infrastructure. Closing her fingers on the brake levers to pause at an intersection, Darcy reminded herself that she had spent the first two decades of life doing quite well without Loki. Before that fateful night in the desert when Thor dropped out of the sky, to Darcy, Norse gods had been on par with the tooth fairy, imaginary and the kind of thing cooked up by hallucinating Vikings who'd drunk too much seawater. She stood up on the bicycle pedals, accelerating through the cross street, and briefly pondered the possibility that the tooth fairy might be real. If so, she was a cheap-ass kind of fairy. A quarter per tooth? Rip-off.

By the time she made it home, the decision had been made. The dream was just an embarrassing admission of Darcy's insecurities, and nothing that she needed to share with Loki.

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A while later, Darcy sat at the table eating cereal. She beamed at Thor when he strolled into the kitchen. It was so good to be back in the regular routine.

"Hey, big guy. I'll give you ten bucks if you wake up your brother."

Without hesitation, Thor responded, "Not for all the gold in the nine realms."

"Coward," she teased, wondering immediately if she'd made a mistake when he paused, a box of Pop-Tarts in hand, angry indignation flickering in his blue eyes.

That quickly gave way to amusement. "Also, 'craven,' and 'chicken-hearted,'" he agreed. "He is

yours now, Lady Darcy. Many happy morns to you."

Taking a page from her mom's favorite movie, *Say Anything*, she stood by her bed, clock radio held like a boom box over her head, and switched it on full blast. Only instead of Peter Gabriel, a mariachi band's *ompas* reverberated in the small room. Loki's eyelids fluttered and he made a vague hand gesture in her direction. The fire alarms squeaked and then went off. Jane's and Thor's unhappy protest of "Loki!" followed. He sighed and opened his eyes. With a second wave of his hand the alarms and radio were silenced.

Darcy set the radio on the nightstand and perched on the edge of the bed, just far enough away to avoid touching him. "Mortals shouldn't drink and drive and Loki shouldn't make magic in the morning."

"Once I could manage such a rudimentary spell in my sleep." The words were bitter, but his tone and demeanor vaguely amused. "Given a choice, by the way, I prefer suffocation," he said, referring to her previous method of waking him. "It embodies so much more of the personal touch."

"Get up." Trying to think unsexy thoughts, she grabbed his hand and pulled. "You've got scientific frontiers to cross and we've got a mystery to solve." Her hand slipped a little in his, scuffing the burn on her hand.

Seeing her wince, he sat up and examined her hand. "The little beast did this."

"Defending me from you," she reminded.

He wrapped his other hand around her wrist, his eyes growing distant. She cocked her head questioningly as he lapsed into silence. "What...? Ow!" The burn started to sting like someone had rubbed it with alcohol. Instinctively, she tried to pull away, but was trapped in his strong grip. "Let go."

He did and she jerked backward, eyes on her finger. "Wow." She poked a finger at the remaining bits of blistered skin and the pink, tender but healed skin beneath.

"I would not dare do that with anything other than a minor wound," he said.

"Why not?"

"Because mortal flesh responds poorly to accelerated healing. All healing requires energy, and with a more significant injury, the human body responds to magical attempts to hasten healing by taking energy from surrounding flesh. The result is often more lethal than the initial wound. I don't know how to circumvent the problem." He met her eyes. "I never put much thought into the matter...before."

He looked away and changed the subject, abruptly. "There were traces of magic on the file you found in Edwards's shop, correct?" She nodded and he smiled slyly and said, "You have a gift for getting what you want from SHIELD, including from the indomitable director."

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Darcy waited until nine o'clock before she made the call, assuming Fury might be more amenable to her request if he'd had time for a cup of coffee and a jelly doughnut or whatever directors of super secret security agencies had for breakfast. Picking up the phone, she hit the pound key and the number two (number one being Sean's number). It rang four times before Cora Chen, Nick Fury's secretary, picked up.

"Hi, Cora!" Darcy said cheerfully.

"Ms. Lewis."

"How're you doing?" The small talk was pointless, but then, so was asking for Fury. Darcy already knew the answer she'd get to that request.

"Very well, thank you. And yourself?" said Cora, also knowing what was coming next, but following their usual script.

"Better than an Oreo and a big glass of cold milk. Is the Director in? I need to ask him for a solid."

"Director Fury is out of state on urgent business."

"He's always out of town when it's me on the phone," observed Darcy. "Thanks to me, he's racking up some serious frequent flyer miles."

"Would you like to leave a message?"

"Tell him that Loki and I want to see the rose from the Max's apartment and the file that Sean and I found at Edwards's shop."

"Director Fury isn't going to agree to that," said Cora. Darcy had a suspicion that she was on speaker phone and Fury was standing before Cora's desk, mouthing responses to his secretary.

"Why not?"

"The Director is a busy man--"

"Busy? Doing what? Is there a big sale on eye patches going on somewhere? Maybe he should get a brown one, that like, matches his skin tone and paint an eyeball on it."

There was a long pause and Darcy was sure she could feel Fury's ferocious mono-glare through the phone. "I will have to get authorization, but I may be able to arrange something," Cora said crisply.

"I knew you'd come through, Cora. Girl power, right?"

Cora's sigh seemed to be echoed by another.

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A three-man security detail arrived around three o'clock, announced by a chime as the Fish Bowl's door opened. Darcy didn't recognize two of the guards, both male, but one was the young hotshot who subbed for Pam on Floor One and who delighted in hassling Darcy for several forms of ID.

"We're hear to escort you," he said to her, "and him," he gestured at Loki with his eyes, "to view some secured evidence."

Thor, who was making another attempt at "useful" by organizing graphs on the table, rose to accompany them. "Not you," said the guard rudely, "just those two."

"You don't get one without the other," said Darcy.

Thor strode toward the door, irritation evident, but at that point an unlikely ally stepped forward. Deloris, their floor's guard, had followed the men to the door. "Let it go, Reynolds," she said. "You know the two can't be separated."

"I have orders to-

"To let Ms. Lewis and Loki examine evidence connected to the murders of Sandoval and Valenzuela." She scowled coldly at Loki. "After everything he's done, the least he can do is find the person who killed Max and Andy. He can't do that unless Thor goes along."

Reynolds tried to stare down Deloris, but she had a few inches on him and, as a woman in a male-dominated profession, possibly years of experience deflecting bullshit from better men than him.

As Darcy, Loki, Thor and Jane took the lift to Floor Three, Darcy made a note to bring Deloris extra chocolate from the break room.

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They marched down the long hallway in their usual configuration, Jane and Thor, with Jane just slightly ahead, then Loki a few paces back and Darcy behind him like a shadow.

Her mind went back several months to the reason why she always followed at his heels. It was the first day that Thor and Loki had accompanied her and Jane to work. The four had all just gotten out of Jane's SUV, where they were met by the overeager guards who would escort them into the building.

Now, months later, SHIELD's security detail remained devout Loki haters - with admittedly good reason - but most, worn down by his sullen indifference, had lost their jumped-up angry edge in his presence. But on that first day, the guards, probably harboring some heroic fantasy of being the one to put-down Asgard's very bad dog, were giddy with trigger-happy energy.

Loki, no doubt accustomed to suspicion even before his recent destructive shenanigans, was unbothered. His brother, however, wasn't amused. Squealing, panty-throwing, Asgardian fangirls probably mobbed Thor everywhere he went back home, and he obviously had grown tired of the un-welcome wagon here on Midgard. He glowered at the guards, who glared back. Darcy took a cautious breath, certain she was about to suffocate on all the testosterone in the air.

Jane had led the way inside with Thor positioning himself at her side, but just a shade behind, his stance protective, no doubt in response to the guards' unfriendly body language. Darcy had started to follow, but her shoe scuffed the weirdly uneven ground. She stopped, glanced at the smooth concrete, and dropped a sardonic bow at Loki who was behind her, his position anything but protective. Gesturing ahead, she said, "After you, your royal heinous."

At home, Darcy had already gotten used to the ground moving, literally, when Loki was around. His mischief had been subtle, changing the surface of the carpet just enough to make her shuffle like she hadn't mastered walking, not enough to send her sprawling, but she wouldn't put it past him to make her do a face-plant on the hard concrete.

He walked past her, seeming unaware of her presence, and keeping several paces behind Thor, which, at the time, Darcy assumed was his way of maintaining as much distance between himself and his brother as possible.

Today, she eyed his back, thinking that in retrospect, his pace had always matched hers, with him just a couple steps ahead, even when she was carrying a stack of books or heavy equipment and moving painfully slow. Of course, he never offered to help or acknowledged her presence, but he had always managed to be in her vicinity. Had he liked her a little even then, back when their communication was limited to snark and green laundry? *I'm reading too much into it*, she thought just as he stopped and looked at her.

He had halted because Darcy, unable to think and walk at the same time, had come to a dead stop in the hallway. "The connection between my brain and feet broke," she explained.

He considered her for a couple of heartbeats, and then lifted his arm, made a deliberate fist and bonked her lightly atop her head, as if she were a broken television. "Better?" he asked, smirking. "Or should we employ Mjölnir?"

She took a step and then another. "No hammer of the gods, I'm cool." He shifted to the side, and put a hand on her back, pushing her ahead of him. A few steps later, the industrial linoleum under her feet rippled. She threw him an annoyed glance and kept walking, trusting that he wouldn't actually trip her and if he did, he'd catch her before she fell.

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They were escorted to a room that was clearly used for interrogations. The top half of one wall was made of very dark, one-way glass, with Darcy and friends being on blind side. Darcy waved at the glass wall and whoever was on the other side. A simple, gray, metal table centered the room. On its surface lay the rose in plastic and the file folder. Two matching chairs sat on opposite sides of the table. The four arranged themselves around the table in pairs, Darcy and Loki on one side, Thor and Jane on the other.

Darcy stared down at the evidence on the table and then at the window. "So we're supposed to interrogate the rose and the file?" She elbowed Loki. "I'll be the good cop, you're the bad."

"Too obvious," said Loki, playing along. "I'll be the good cop."

Thor brightened and then scowled dramatically at the evidence on the table. "They are not talking," he said. "Perhaps they need stronger persuasion." He gave Darcy a sly smile, clearly pleased to have understood a Midgard cultural reference. All those nights watching crime shows with Jane had paid off. Darcy caught Loki darting an amused glance at his brother.

Jane crossed her arms over her chest. "My clients have nothing to say until I speak with them alone, alone," she said, going into plucky public defender mode. "And did you clowns even bother to read them their Miranda rights?"

Darcy grinned at the window again. If Fury was back there, a little plume of steam was probably emanating from his shiny brown scalp.

The plastic on the rose crackled as Loki picked it up. Darcy watched him, a little sidetracked by the way his elegant hand held the stem, her skin remembering the touch of his fingertips. She swallowed hard and glanced down at the file folder, hoping her face hadn't revealed too much to the unseen watcher. Setting the rose down, he picked up the folder and flipped through its contents, stopping on the architectural drawing where the Fish Bowl had been circled.

With a flick of his wrist, he shut the file and set it back on the table. He considered the rose, expressionless, and then stepped back, putting his hands on Darcy's shoulders and moving her slightly before him. "Pick up the rose," he said.

Her eyes flicked to the window, at Loki and hers murky reflection, him towering behind her, the pale oval of her face against his dark clothing. She did what he asked and he leaned forward, reaching to wrap his hand around her wrist. The edges of leather pressed through the back of her shirt along with a sudden powerful self consciousness. Had he ever stood this close to her in the building? Could Fury or whoever watched tell that rumor was now truth, that she and Loki were lovers? Did she care? Did he? She glanced back and up at Loki, whose cold expression gave



nothing away.

*Focus.* She rubbed her fingers on the plastic, using the noise to push away the awkward awareness of Loki's hand on her wrist, his body touching hers. The combination of his magic and the stranger's tingled in her fingertips and up her arm. She took hold of the stem with her other hand so she could explore the rose with the other. The flower practically sang with magic. After she'd examined the rose, she picked up the folder. As before, the drawings and documents within meant little to her. Running her fingers over the page with the Fish Bowl, she encountered no hint of magic. The only electrical vibration of power she felt was on the outside of the folder.

After she set the file back down, he let her wrist go and shifted to stand at her side, facing her. "What did you feel?" he asked.

Across the table, Jane and Thor watched her and Darcy was struck by the similarity in Thor and Loki's body language. Of course, the two were as different as night and day. Thor, blond and broad shouldered, his blocky frame softened incongruously by the curves of powerful muscle; Loki, lanky, all sharp edges and somehow still graceful. But "brother" was a hard habit to quit and both men studied her, heads cocked at the same angle, eyebrows lifted to the same degree, mouths drawing an identical line on their faces.

Loki sat on the table by the rose, his attention still on Darcy, like a professor waiting for the right answer. A suggestion of insecurity burned in her stomach, and then she remembered that she always felt this way, felt the obligation to be the pretty, ditzy airhead, right before the correct response arrived on her lips.

"That's not one of your mother's roses," she stated, her words directed at Thor, knowing that even the m-word might make Loki snarl a denial about family relations. "It's not even from Asgard. The killer probably bought it from the local florist." Her fingers touched the end of the stem. "The magic started here, and moved up," she ran her index finger over the smooth, thorn-free surface under plastic, her mind looking for the right analogy, "like a fire, changing. On the flower, it burned really hot, making the rose look like one of Frigga's."

"Is this true?" Thor looked at Loki for confirmation. Loki ignored him and said to Darcy, "And the documents?"

"The magic there is cold." Tapping her finger on the rose, she added, "If the magic on the rose is like a fire, then the stuff on the file folder is just a smudge of charcoal." She met his eyes, realization setting in. "Somebody, the killer, I guess, planted magic on the file."

Loki gave the window a supercilious look. He stood and started for the door, clearly indicating that whatever else could be said, wasn't going to be uttered under the watchful eye of SHIELD. Darcy frowned at his back because, first, it was a smarter impulse than ogling his ass, and second, because she was mildly annoyed. It was totally cool to be right about the magic on the evidence - he would have contradicted her if she were wrong. But he could have just as easily stated the same conclusion without having Darcy put on a show for Fury or whoever was behind the window. So what was the point of all that?

One thing was clear to Darcy. Someone had known that Sean and Darcy would be going out to poke around Edwards's shop that night. That person had probably seen to it that the door would be unlocked. The killer must have also known about Edwards's lethal booby trap and probably expected Sean and Darcy to exit the building in tiny, charred pieces, scattered to the wind with smoke.

Sean was currently down in Albuquerque at a conference for federal accountants and comptrollers,

which, in his words was "a bunch of bureaucrats whining hypocritically about the bureaucracy that made their jobs possible." Earlier that morning she'd asked if he could dig up any background info on Arnold King. He must have taken time between the whining to find something, since a short stack of papers was waiting on her desk when she returned to the Fish Bowl.

She showed it to Loki, who wrote, "Later, in the vehicle," on a corner of the top sheet. The message was clear. The killer was using SHIELD's surveillance to watch them.

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The security screeners took an oddly low-tech approach to policing what sort of data and information left the building. They let Jane come and go with an iPad and laptop, but checked every scrap of paperwork. Probably because SHIELD had other ways to monitor data on electronic devices. Knowing this, Darcy had given Arnold King's background report to Loki assuming that even SHIELD's best scanning technology wasn't a match for the sneaky immortal's ability to hide stuff in his clothing.

A half mile away from the facility, Loki disabled any listening devices in the SUV and handed Darcy the background check papers. She summarized what they contained.

"Arnold King grew up on a cattle ranch outside of Tucumcari, New Mexico. Looks like he tried to follow the family tradition by going to New Mexico State University to study Animal Husbandry. He bailed on that after a year and transferred to UNM where he majored in business administration. That must be where he met his wife, Ruth Espinosa. I guess he wasn't the school type, because he quit UNM after a semester and worked various sales jobs for a few years.

"Besides a speeding ticket and one citation for fishing without a license, he's a law abiding citizen. He and Ruth have two daughters, Janet, who's sixteen, and Taylor, fourteen. They bought the ranch in Puente Antiguo five years ago. The ranch doesn't bring in much money, but they're not bankrupt or anything. Ruth brings home the bacon. She works as a benefits administrator for Los Alamos National Labs and her official address is listed as an apartment in Los Alamos.

"SHIELD's in-house report says there's no evidence of marital problems. Ruth lives in Los Alamos most of the week to avoid the commute from hell and so the girls can attend Los Alamos High School. She was on vacation last week, otherwise, Arnold's corpse might not have been found until the weekend."

"Perhaps she won't be home tonight," observed Loki.

"Her husband just died. She probably won't go into work this week." Darcy pondered this for a moment. "Of course, she might stay in Los Alamos instead of sticking around the place where her husband died."

"Can you use magic to hide us?" Jane asked Loki.

"What?" said Thor. "Sneak about? Like thieves in the night? That would be..."

*Don't say dishonorable, don't say dishonorable*, thought Darcy, glancing at Loki.

Fortunately, Thor's brain sprinted and caught up with his mouth. "Brilliant!" he said. "And fun!"

Loki's expression indicated he knew what Thor almost said, but he refrained from any comment on that matter. "No. I say we go out to King's home and knock on the door. If no one is home, we investigated the grounds. If someone is there, we speak with them and then investigate the grounds."

"What if," Darcy glanced down at the papers to refresh her memory, "Ruth is home and she knows who I am?"

"Have you ever met the woman?" asked Loki.

"No."

"Then, if she's ever seen you at all, it was around town, possibly at a distance. In a different context, at night with your hair pulled back, no glasses, and in the company of Thor, Jane and I, she isn't likely to make the connection."

"This will be a fine adventure," said Thor confidently.

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Inkblot was nowhere in sight when they go home, which was probably why a fat green grasshopper sat undisturbed on the top step of the porch. Spotting the insect, Bic sped over and attacked even though the bug was nearly as big as she was. With a rasping, clicking protest, the grasshopper flew awkwardly to a nearby sagebrush, lizard in hot pursuit. The bug landed high in the bush and Bic circled in the sand below.

Thor laughed at the lizard's antics and stomped up the stairs with Jane. Darcy slowed down. "Hang on," she said, tugging at Loki's sleeve. Thor glanced back at them and then continued into the house, the door latch clicking shut behind him.

Darcy answered Loki's quizzical look with silence. He shrugged and sat on the middle stair, grinned impishly up at her. "Is this the point where I ask what is wrong and you say, 'Nothing'?"

"Nope." She shook her head. "I'll tell you exactly what's wrong. Back in the interrogation room, me performing like your trained monkey. What the fuck?"

He leaned his elbows on his knees and smirked. "The vision in my left eye is nearly restored, but I still don't see the problem."

"Right. Odin may have scrambled your brain like yesterday's breakfast, but you're still too smart to play dumb."

The mention of Odin hardened his features, ire burning in his eyes, but if there was one thing she knew by now, it was that she could get away with that kind of statement. "So too are you," he retorted.

"Huh?"

"It's time you stopped hiding behind your lovely face," he raked his eyes down her body, "and other assets."

"I don't--" She considered her words. "Maybe I do. So what? There's power in being underestimated."

A slight smile toyed with his mouth and then fled. "True. But SHIELD and others aren't merely underestimating your intelligence, they are denying its existence entirely."

She shrugged. "My smarts are like Bigfoot."

"If I recall correctly, Bigfoot does exist." He dismissed her question with an arrogant shake of his

head. "You could wield more influence if you are seen as more than my associate."

"Not associate, sidekick."

"Associate. Sidekicks too often meet an unpleasant end in the interest of generating a sense of danger in the plot."

"Or to give the hero a reason to get off his ass and get his revenge on." She grinned and joked, "Will you avenge me, Loki?"

He stared up at her, green eyes ablaze with undecipherable emotion; even seated, his bearing emanated so much inhuman power that she took a step back. For the most part, she had lost the ability to fear him, but in that moment she had the chilling sense that she had done something very wrong. Oddly, the force she felt lacked real menace, which made it all the more frightening, because it left her without the smart impulse to run like hell. Instead she felt like a kite in March gale, desperate to escape to the freedom of the sky, but bound by a string made from things unspoken in his intense stare.

The muscles in his neck tensed as he pulled his gaze away from her. "I am not a hero. I am Loki and if you are to be my partner in crime, you can't keep playing the fool."

Still unbalanced by what just happened, she fumbled around her emotions and found her earlier irritation. "So this is about you? You're ashamed of me? I thought you didn't give a fuck what people thought?"

"I don't-" A dark grin took over his face, his mood doing another capricious shift. "Some of my recent adventures may have been driven in part by a need to manipulate others' perceptions of me," he conceded.

"Next time, hire a PR agent," she said, annoyed by his flippancy. "It'll be cheaper and a lot less lethal to us mortals."

He held a hand out toward her. A hint of his previous intensity still smoldered under humor in his eyes and she hesitated. Against her better judgment, she took his hand. Eyes never leaving hers, he kissed her hand, a self-satisfied smile on his lips.

She sighed. Loki could tell when she was lying, but for some reason, he didn't seem to read her as well as he did other people. But right then, with him looking up at her like a fairy tale prince, he owned her and he knew it. Suddenly uneasy, she gave his hand a squeeze, freed hers from his, and joined him on the step.

An SUV drove along the road, red, not black and covered in political bumper stickers, many from elections long past. They watched until it moved out of sight and then Loki spoke. "The opinions of mortals are of no import to me. I need neither their esteem nor approval." Darcy decided not to point out that she was mortal. "For months, I have listened to what Fury's lackeys had said about you. At the onset, their mutterings were inconsequential, random bits of information about the place where I find myself trapped.

"Then it became evident that the image conjured by gossip did not match the woman who ran this household, manipulated Fury, and who would become my friend." Under the sagebrush, Bic made a wild leap at the grasshopper and missed. A tiny flame flashed and the gray-green leaves in a branch above the lizard began to blacken. Loki waved his hand and the fire died. "I will not have those fools speaking of you in such a manner."

Darcy didn't like the sound of that. "The only joy some of those bed wetters have is making up porn-y stories about the research assistant and the god. Take that away and they'll realize the only thing warming their bed is their own pee."

"This does not bother you." The sentence wasn't quite a question or a statement.

"If I let it bother me, I'd be giving them control over me." He looked at her, mild admiration on his face, which made her stupidly happy. And reckless. So much that the next question blurted from her mouth. "It doesn't bother you at all? Knowing people died, people like me, in New York and elsewhere because of you?"

A maelstrom of emotion raged in his eyes, fueled mostly by anger and scorn. The inhuman aspect of his face returned, giving the hard perfection of his face a terrible beauty. She could tell he was about to do the equivalent of a Loki flounce, exit stage right in a swirl of magic.

Heated by the late afternoon sun, the leather under her fingers was warm when she touched his arm. "How about you don't disappear in a green plume of smoke like a genie looking for his bottle, and talk to me." The expected you-can't-tell-me-what-to-do glower was leveled her way. She met his glower and raised with an unflinching stare.

He folded, literally, and slumped forward, face in his hands. "You are so infuriating."

"Is that better or worse than unnerving?"

He sat up. "Better, I think. I find anger...comforting."

"Comfort? Maybe instead of anger you just need a stuffed animal." His eyes traveled over her body and she shrugged. "Dude, if it'll keep you from unleashing aliens of mass destruction on unsuspecting cities, I'll totally be your teddy bear."

"It might," he said, looking at his hands. Because they were one of his best assets, she studied them too, waiting. "You expect me to tell you that I feel guilt for the deaths I've caused, that the weight of responsibility bears heavy on my shoulders."

Because she love the shape, the way slim hand fanned out to clever fingers, she took his hand in hers. "I know you really do see mortals as insects." She moved his index finger, bending it at the knuckle, imagining blue skin underneath. "Thor's not much better." Loki looked at her, surprised. "He cares about Jane, and the Avengers are his substitute Warriors Three and Sif. But I believe he thinks the rest of us are like an endangered species he's obligated to protect, like pandas."

"Pandas that breed like rabbits," said Loki.

She elbowed him in the ribs, hard. "He doesn't want to squish us, but his concern is kind of patronizing, individually we aren't worth that much to him."

"He's the crown prince of Asgard. In truth, he holds himself above even the majority of his own people. Like Odin, he speaks of obligation and honor to the realm, but the people are an abstraction." Darcy nodded, suspecting that Loki, also a prince, felt the same way. "That is the way of all elite in any of the realms. Even here on Midgard, the wealthy view themselves as far more than the rabble."

Darcy turned his hand over and traced the lines, wondering what a carnival palm reader would make of them. "Thor's commanded armies," she said. "I guess emotional distancing goes with the territory when you're sending soldiers off to be fried by dragons." Such a beautiful hand, so deceptively human.

"Is that it?," she asked. "The people who died because of you, they were just...abstractions?"

"Yes." His admission was horrible, but the look on his face stopped her from saying so. His eyes took her in, his implacable mask fallen away and the person beneath terribly young and confused. "Everything, since that moment when I saw my true nature, laid bare by a cold hand," a muscle in his cheek twitched with anger, but his expression remained lost, "has been framed in abstraction.

"Millennia of memories scattered, but my recent history lies exposed like bleached bones on the sands of my mind. The events of New York are the most vivid. I have never felt so much and been so empty." Darcy froze, as if her stillness might keep him talking. "Every detail, the smallest moments are recorded in my mind's eye, the sounds, smells, the taste of pain and smoke," his eyelids lowered and he licked his lips, "the glory of a city crushed beneath my army and the sweet ecstasy of magic toiling in my blood, all are rendered in exquisite clarity in my memory. And yet every perfectly preserved remembrance feels as though it is not mine and simultaneously can belong to no one else. The experience plays itself again and again with the illogical sense of a dream. A nightmare."

"The nightmares you have when you sleep alone?" she asked.

As she watched, the cold mask returned to his face. "Yes," he said, a trace of the resentment from the previous night on his face. "The nightmares that you inexplicably banish." He looked away. "They are mine and I have no right to escape them."

"Probably not," she said, "but maybe I have a right to sleep next to the guy I like a lot."

"Silly girl," he said, emotions warring on his face. "Silly, smart, infuriating girl, I cannot tell you what you want to hear, that I feel genuine shame for what I've done.

"What I feel," he wrenched his hand from her, leaning over his knees again, "isn't quite conscience, it is indescribable." Bic, bored with the grasshopper, slithered up to the porch and looked up at her creator. Loki turned to Darcy. "I have seen space in a manner that Jane's formulas cannot begin to describe, been witness to fate's infinite possibilities and the alternate histories therein." He touched her chin and pulled away as if burned. "And I know that in some permutations, you are in New York or too close to Thor when I strike him down in Puente Antiguo, and I am the end of you before we ever meet.

"I cannot tell you what you want to hear," he said, voice thick with emotion, "but I can say that you are not an abstraction." Bic, perhaps sensing the dark mood, started to do her spinney little dance, tail scribing circles in the sand at the foot of the stairs.

He watched the little animal's performance, the rest of his emotionless mask closing off his face like a stage curtain. Everything about him now was like the Loki she'd first met, walled off from everyone, not a hint of vulnerability coming from his haughty exterior.

Moving her gaze from him, she looked around the rustic little neighborhood, where the many abstractions went about their lives. At her side, she felt Loki shift his weight, preparing to rise and without looking she grasped his arm firmly. She knew what he was thinking. That she would reject him now. And, honestly, the thought crossed her mind.

That thought was joined by the ugly truth that most of the planet's human beings were abstractions to Darcy, too. She wasn't intentionally callous. She knew that every minute of the day, horrible things were happening to people somewhere. The news media only depicted a fraction of the misery in the world. But if she let herself think too much about it, she would be devoured by an overwhelming sense of helplessness and grief in the face of so much pain.

She didn't even want to think about the guilt she'd feel if she actually killed someone. Thor and Loki, however, had been going from one violent adventure to another long before the events in Puente Antiguo and New York, long before there even was a New York. Thor's stories of battle were shiny, clean, sanitized, but Darcy knew enough about her own planet's history to know that war was blood, shit and collateral damage.

It didn't excuse anything Loki had done, but she could see why the immortal could completely detach himself from the death and destruction caused by his glorious purposes. To Loki, that mindset was probably an old habit, and frankly, given his mental instability, the only way he hung onto his remaining sanity.

She let go of his arm, wrapped her own around his back and snuggled tight to his side. As teddy bears went, she wasn't that cuddly, probably more like Mark Wahlberg's raunchy pal in the movie *Ted*.

"You're really going to do this?" she said, changing the subject. "Come with me out to the Kings' house?"

"Of course." He smirked. "Mrs. King has just lost her spouse. Someone must to keep you from blowing up the unfortunate woman's home."

## Chapter 24

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Darcy's little Honda wasn't made for transporting demi-gods, or basketball players, or anyone who needed headroom. She turned the key in the ignition and darted a glance back at the two princes who were crammed on the backseat. Darcy and Jane sat in front with the seats far forward to give the men leg room. She grinned at Loki, thinking that if he had insisted on wearing his crazy antelope-horned helmet, they would have had to cut a hole in the car's roof.

Actually, he'd been suspiciously cooperative so far, agreeing to wear black jeans and a black shirt. He stuck the black baseball cap, however, on Darcy's head, noting that thanks to her recent mischief in town, she needed subterfuge more than he did.

She still wore the cap, her hair pulled back in a ponytail. Her glasses were perched on her nose, to be removed when they reached the ranch, but a necessity now, since she was driving.

It was ten-fifty, five minutes after the latest SHIELD patrol had passed the house. They were taking Darcy's car, because SHIELD was less likely to pay attention to its absence. The plan, if anyone asked, was to say that Jane wanted to collect data using her old instruments -- the ones cobbled together with duct tape, chewing gum and parts from old VCRs -- to test for calibration errors in more recent data. Even Darcy thought it was a lame excuse, but Jane dumped some of the old equipment in the trunk to give the lie some truth. (Loki, fascinated with Jane's homemade high-tech, was happily investigating one of the smaller instruments, i.e., taking it apart.)

Darcy pulled onto the road, glancing back at the house, where Inkblot sat on the porch, frowning up at Bic who was perched on the railing. The lizard had tried to follow Darcy, but Darcy ordered her to stay and guard the house. A flickering blue glow from the television pulsed through the front window's closed blinds, giving the illusion that someone was home watching television.

She took the shortcut into town hoping that any SHIELD patrols would be unlikely to take their shiny, possibly never-actually-been-off-road SUVs down the dirt track. The little car's front end dropped into a particularly cavernous rut and there was a loud thud and grunt from the backseat. From the corner of her eye, she saw Thor rubbing his head. Loki, who had somehow managed not to dent the roof with his skull, continued dismantling Jane's device. "In light of Darcy's phenomenal ability to located the deepest ruts in the road, perhaps Thor should be wearing his helm," he deadpanned, a faint smirk on his face.

"We could get him a football helmet," said Jane.

"Yeah, a Vikings' helmet," agreed Darcy.

"I--" Thor started, mildly indignant, and then he tilted his head, obviously considering the option. "Can you purchase such a thing?"

Darcy and Jane looked at each other. "Christmas present?" mouthed Jane and Darcy grinned.

Loki meanwhile, lifted the partially dismembered scientific instrument to the light. Darcy felt and tasted magic as he zapped it. The device began to hum.



Jane shot Darcy a worried look. "He isn't going to make a weapon with that, is he?"

"You flatter yourself," Loki replied, his left hand sending a spiral of green magic at the device. "It's a clever construction, but hardly the building block for anything of real use."

Jane shrugged and said to Darcy. "Well, at least he said it was clever."

As the car moved through the older section of town, Darcy realized that this was the first time Thor and Loki had been there. Thor's short stay had been confined to the newer section to the northwest, and Loki, well, he'd never actually set foot in the town. They made the daily trek to work via a side road, south of town, and until recently, Loki refused to go anywhere else. The car passed Eagle Road and Darcy wondered what Sean was up to. Probably already in bed since he was a real adult with a genuine career that required more than three operating brain cells.

When they reached the newer part of town, Darcy's stomach grew tight, first, at the sight of Max and Andy's apartment complex, and then as they neared the center of town where her favorite mad scientist had aimed a killer robot at his brother. She braked the car at the stoplight and the light from Izzy's Diner's sign lit their faces. A cloud of awkward discomfort settle on everyone in the car.

Not everyone, actually. Loki pointed at the diner. "Is that the establishment you and Sean frequent?" he asked, apparently blissfully unaware of the mood in the vehicle. Jane, Darcy and Thor exchanged a look.

"I believe it is," said Thor, clearing his throat. "Their coffee is good, but their mugs, fragile."

Jane and Darcy laughed weakly, and Darcy let out a sigh of relief, grateful for Thor's attempt at humor. The light turned green and she accelerated through the intersection, mind seeking another focus. "Are you sure we should just go up to the door and knock? What if Mrs. King isn't, uh, happy to see us?"

"I could cloud her mind a bit, make her more cooperative," offered Loki, helpfully.

"No!" said Jane, her thoughts no doubt going to Erik. With tight smile, she added, "Please, don't."

"When I asked you to rewire my brain against nightmares, you said it was too risky," observed Darcy. "Why's it now safe to mess with Ruth King's head?"

"It isn't," Loki answered, tone matter of fact.

Darcy let her eyes drift to the rearview mirror and his reflection. Thor's terrible haircut and the ordinary human clothes built the illusion of human, but Loki's cavalier attitude toward rearranging the contents of Ruth's skull was the true expression of the alien landscape in his head. "Jane's right," she said. "No magic lobotomies for anyone." She sighed, realizing that being the God of Mischief's conscience was a full time job with lots of unpaid overtime. The benefits weren't bad, though.

"SHIELD meddled with the memories of many of Puente Antiguo's citizens," said Loki, a little smugly.

"They did?" said Jane. "How do you know?"

"It is documented in their electronic files."

"Whoa! Tell me you didn't use my laptop to hack SHIELD's files," said Darcy.

"Of course, not. I used the computer in the Fish Bowl," Loki replied. "Nearly a year ago, you, Jane and Erik-- three notable parties to the destruction in town--moved back into the region. Despite your association with a costly and extraordinary event, the citizenry accepted your presence, never made mention of the incident."

"We didn't do anything wrong," said Jane. "We tried to help."

"I doubt that all would see it that way. From the perspective of some, you brought trouble to their quiet little village," said Loki. "A few months after your return, a man, the fourth party to the chaos, moved in with you. A man who died and was resurrected on a street in the midst of town; a man who utilized the mysterious artifact that had been a source of fascination to the town's populace. And still, no one has come out to the trailer or shown more than a passing interest in any of us."

"Thor saved the town," said Jane. "He's a hero."

"Again, Jane," said Loki, with heavy condescension, "you cling to your limited perspective. The townspeople did not and still don't know why the Destroyer appeared on their streets. To them what transpired was an incomprehensible conflict that destroyed property and their livelihoods."

Jane turned toward Darcy, her expression saying, "See? This is what I put up with everyday."

"Loki," growled Thor, "be civil."

"How did SHIELD do it?" asked Darcy, before the two siblings reenacted one of their battles in the backseat. "Fog people's minds?"

"The exact mechanism isn't documented, but they perpetrated their mischief whilst interviewing people after the incident. The people were led to believe they were being scanned for radiation."

"I wonder how many memories SHIELD steals from us when we go through the building's scanners?" said Darcy. Her eyes grew wide. "Oh, no, I can't remember my senior prom." She shrugged. "Yeah, I wish. That dress, my date...ugh."

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Once out of town, Darcy switched on the headlights' high beams and pushed the car up to Route 8's limit, 55 mph. Outside the town, any signs of civilization quickly vanished. A few homes, mostly trailers could be seen in the distance, but the land was otherwise undeveloped rangeland, most the property of the Bureau of Land Management. The waning moon cast pale silver light over flat terrain that was interrupted by the occasional low hill. In addition to the usual clumps of sage- and saltbush, the plump dark shapes of piñon pines and juniper dotted the landscape.

Arnold and Ruth King's ranch was located eleven miles northwest of Puente Antiguo, with their home being about a half mile off Route 8. "That's it," said Jane, who was acting as navigator, using a map from Google. "County Road 12."

The county apparently didn't take the name too seriously, since the road, like the shortcut to Puente Antiguo, was short on paving and high on small boulders and potholes. Darcy patted the dashboard in apology to her poor little car for the abuse to its suspension.

A barbed wire fence ran the length of the road and the King's property was marked with a mailbox on a post, the number three painted on the box. A couple of round, red bicycle reflectors were nailed on the post, probably to keep people from running over it in the dark.

A gate greeted them just a few feet off the road. Jane got out to open then close it once they were through the gateway. Darcy smiled, remembering simpler times, back when names like Thor and Loki were something from silly old myths. She, Jane and Erik had spent plenty of nights driving around the desert, sometimes on private property (with permission) looking for the best place to collect Jane's data. The region's ranchers were generally nice enough so long as you remembered to keep their gates shut.

The Kings' main ranch house, a sprawling mass in the darkness, was accompanied by three outbuildings; two large, one a shed. The main house, a flat-roofed adobe, was dark and the only illumination was a security light positioned on one of the larger outbuildings, a barn probably. There were no cars in front of the house. A large, late model truck with peeling white paint was parked by the barn.

As soon as the four got out of the car, four dogs boiled out of the darkness, barking at the intruders. In the moonlight, Darcy made out two Australian shepherds with mottled gray, brown and white fur, a red heeler, and funny looking mutt that was the answer to the question, "What happens when you cross a Dachshund with a black Labrador?"

Darcy, prepared for this eventuality, tugged a zip-lock bag from her backpack, peeled it open and offered it to her fellow sleuths. "Let's make friends." Jane reached in first, taking three dog biscuits. Hearing the sound of a bag opening, the DachsoLab and both shepherds hurried over and Jane handed treats to the three. The red heeler hung back, still barking, pointy ears pricked, conscience warring with its belly. Thor took a biscuit and tossed it to the dog. It sniffed the treat and then ate with more finesse than its buddies, who were inhaling biscuits as fast as Darcy and Jane could hand them out.

Sitting down, the red dog cocked its head at Thor and barked. He laughed and threw it another biscuit. A few seconds later, loyalty lost to liver-flavored yummys and the animal trotted over to its new best friend, the thunder god. "Treacherous beast," said Thor as he crouched and buried his fingers in the dog's roan red fur and gave it a good scratch.

"Dogs in Asgard can't be bribed with treats?" asked Darcy.

Thor drew himself up, tall and proud. "Asgard's hounds are renowned for their bravery, speed and ferocity." Behind him, Loki snorted. A smile twinkled in Thor's eyes. "Also, their loyalty can be bought for the price of a small slice of venison."

He turned to Loki. "Do you recall Odin's favorite fleethound, the one you called Sausage Slave?" Loki shook his head.

Thor grinned at Jane and Darcy. "Odin loved the beast, claimed it was the fastest in all the realms. Unbeatable." The blond prince's good humor faded a little and his eyes turned distant with memories. "The animal is dead now, gone several centuries, but I remember its last race.

"Odin bragged that not only was the hound fleet, but that once set on a lure or hare, it would pursue prey with unwavering tenacity." He grinned at Loki. "Odin's esteem for the beast's speed was not misplaced, but as you and I had observed during its training, it was easily distracted."

"Odin didn't know this, why?" asked Darcy.

"Odin has never had much interest in the actual training of the hounds," said Loki. "That much I do remember."

Thor nodded. "He left the matter to the kennel master. Loki and I warned him that the hound was

inconsistent at best, but he brushed off our concerns. He arranged a race to be held at the fall harvest celebration and challenged the other realms to bring their fastest hounds."

"Cue the ominous music," said Darcy.

"Indeed," said Thor. "On the day of the race, the spectators along the course were so many that they made an almost impenetrable wall. It was a cheerful crowd; the mead vendors enjoyed brisk sales. Many of the assembled, of course, were dignitaries from other realms including the ambassador from Vanaheim. What was his name?" Thor paused, digging through mountains of memory. "His face was broader than tall, bug eyed." He smiled at Loki. "You called him Lord Toady behind his back."

"Only behind his back?" said Darcy to Loki, whose expression indicated he didn't remember the man.

"I couldn't say it to his face," Loki said with overplayed innocence. "That would be cruel." Even in the weak moonlight, Darcy could see Jane roll her eyes.

Thor continued his story. "Loki, feigning drunken clumsiness, stumbled among the dignitaries, a plate of sausages in hand. As fate would have it, he tripped and spilled his meal on the Vanaheim ambassador's clothing scant minutes before the race was to begin." He swept his hand down his torso, indicating the path of the fallen food. "When the hounds were slipped from their traces, all lunged forward after the lure. A running fleethound is beauty in motion and these were no exception...save one.

"Odin's beloved hound, who immediately leapt off the track, found the sausage-stinking ambassador and closed its mouth on his crotch like a babe to the teat."

Thor laughed along with Darcy and Jane. Even Loki cracked a smile. The ranch dogs, caught up in the humor, barked cheerfully. "Lord Toady hopped back to Vanaheim and soon after, another ambassador was appointed."

"Odd that I don't remember that," Loki said, "Or at least Odin's retribution."

"What could Odin do?" said Thor. "Punish you for drunkenness? Most of the court were so into their cups that day that they pissed mead and ale for weeks after. And the mischief involved no telltale magic; he had no proof that it was anything more than an accident on your part."

Darcy elbowed Loki. "See. Magic is overrated."

He faux-glowered at her. "Bite your tongue, woman." To Thor, he said, "Whatever happened to the animal? Did Odin have it skinned?"

"No," said Thor, "though he considered the option as recompense for the gold lost in wagers. Frigga took pity on the beast and claimed it as her own."

"Ah, *that* hound," said Loki. He looked at Darcy. "It was the size of one of Midgard's...Great Danes, it but longed to be a lap dog. For years, Frigga often had enormous paw prints on her gowns." Darcy grinned, thinking Frigga sounded a little like Jane, always taking in strays.

For a couple of heartbeats Thor and Loki looked at each other, cheer in Thor's eyes, unguarded confusion in Loki's. A few feet away, the DachsoLab and a shepherd began a playful, growly wrestling match and Loki turned his gaze to the house. "No one's home. The dogs' barking should have alerted anyone to our presence."

They knocked on the door anyway and got no answer. "It looks like Ruth and the girls did stay in Los Alamos," said Jane. "We should still hurry, though, in case SHIELD notices we're all gone." She gave Loki a glancing look and Darcy knew what she was thinking. SHIELD wouldn't like the idea of a certain war criminal wandering around in the night without a security escort, even if he was in the company of his hero brother.

"We can survey the property faster if we split up," said Loki. He nodded at Darcy's backpack. "You have the device?"

"Of course." She hauled the magic detector from her pack along with a flashlight which she handed to Jane. "Guess I should have brought two lights."

Loki answered that comment with a lazy flick of his fingers and a bright orb appeared a few feet before him. "Thor and I will begin with that structure," he pointed at a large, open-sided hay barn, "and proceed to the area to the north and the paddocks. You and Jane will examine the shed and the other building." He fixed a commanding stare on Darcy. "When you are done, come find us. Should you find anything - *anything at all* - of interest, call us." He shot Thor a meaningful look and the blond prince pulled a phone, Jane's cell, from his shirt pocket.

Darcy made a face and gave Loki an impertinent salute. She started to go, but Loki grabbed her arm, hauling her to him. His face in hers, he said, "You will call; you won't touch anything--"

"Yeah, yeah, don't pass Go; don't collect \$200. I get it." She wiggled free of his grasp. At his blank look, she said, "Monopoly. Google it."

Loki scowled, turned on his heels and strode away. "Take care," said Thor before hurrying to catch up with his brother.

Darcy switched the detector on and she and Jane marched across the moonlit ranch, full of purpose, confident. Darcy imagined they were some famous female detective team. Unfortunately, she couldn't immediately come up with any female sleuthing duos, which made her sad.

Seconds later sad turned to disgust. "Ugh," she said, stopping and turning the flashlight on her foot. "Is that horse shit or cow shit?"

"I don't--" began Jane, who, without the light's illumination, tripped and almost fell.

Darcy sighed. Forget detectives. They were more like Lucy and Ethel. With the shepherds and DachsoLab in tow -- the red healer had followed Thor -- they skirted the exterior of the house. Loki had recalibrated the detector, making it more sensitive and adding two detection tones: one for ordinary magic, and a higher pitched beep for residue left by someone moving between space. Picking up nothing around the house, they made for the shed.

The little building turned out to be a combination pump house and storage shed. The mechanisms for providing the property's water supply, auxiliary pump and pressure bladder, took up half the space, the rest devoted to household detritus. Boxes labeled "Christmas," a child's plastic tricycle, even old textbooks, probably Ruth's. Everything including an old kitchen sink, but no magical residue.

Attempting a new approach, Jane and Darcy spent some time walking around the shed in ever larger circles, but again detected nothing. The dogs plopped down in the dirt to watch the humans' ridiculous antics. Darcy stopped and looked across the property, noticing that Thor and Loki had gone out beyond the cow paddocks. "Loki's just humoring us, keeping us occupied and out of his way," she said.

"I know." Jane headed for the barn. "Wouldn't it be great if we actually found something?"

The barn had two large swinging doors, big enough for a truck, on the front end, and a regular-sized door on the side. A hitching rail, constructed from two upright railroad ties and a stretch of metal pipe, was out front. The hitchees, three horses, all some shade of brown, were in a small corral adjacent to the barn. One nickered at their approach. "Do horses need bribes, too?" said Jane. "Maybe we should have brought apples."

The Kings obviously weren't expecting thieves this far out in the boondocks, since the door on the barn, like the shed, wasn't locked. Darcy panned the flashlight over the wall and found a light switch. The interior had a dusty green smell and a second later, when two fluorescent lights hummed to life, they saw why. This barn also held hay, probably for the horses. A tractor and all kinds of equipment were also stored in the space.

Darcy and Jane wandered over to a walled-off room that contained saddles, bridles and other horse-related stuff. Darcy ran the detector over everything, but got no positive response. A mouse skittered just out of the flashlight's beam. "All we're going to find is the Hantavirus," said Jane sadly, as they started to explore the rest of the barn.

Darcy sneezed and led the way around the inside perimeter of the barn. Sweeping the tractor got no response from the detector, but the wooden handle on a shovel generated a little chirp. "Probably just a glitch," she said, running the detector over the surface again. The second chirp was more energetic and had a higher pitch.

"Try the wall behind it," said Jane. Darcy did and that beep was loud and definitely high pitched. "Where's your phone? We should call the guys."

"Mmmm, wait," said Darcy, distractedly. "This thing's sort of buggy." Setting the detector's tip on the wall, she walked toward the hay, the plastic lightly scraping the barn's bare plywood. The beep got stronger, fading a little whenever the detector passed over the vertical wooden 2x4s that made up the barn's framing.

Stopped by the hay that was stacked to the ceiling, some ten feet up, she pointed the detector at a gap where the hay was only one bale high and the surrounding bales made a kind of hay canyon. The noise was a definitive "yes" on magic, the kind that peeled apart space and made a door to someplace else. "Awesome," she said.

"Darcy," said Jane, a hint of warning in her voice, "the phone?"

"Backpack," she whispered and set her foot on a hay bale. Although it looked soft, the hay was packed tight and only wavered a little when she stepped up and onto the rectangular bale.

"Darcy!" Jane's voice was definitely exasperated.

"It's cool." She grinned. "Better than cool." A prickly energy, like the air during a thunderstorm, fizzed against her skin, tickling her scalp. She tightened her finger on the detector's trigger and gasped. The device's beep had taken on a tone that sounded alarmed, but she was too distracted by the sight before her to notice. Under her feet, the bale wobbled as Jane joined her.

"Do you see it, Jane?"

"See what? No."

Darcy turned, putting the detector in Jane's hand, and making her finger squeeze the trigger. "There, and there, and everywhere," she said pointing into the dark gap of the hay, which even

now, without her hand on the magic detector, was still alive with light.

"No," said Jane, even though the detector's trigger was pressed, the shrill noise filling the barn, the dogs starting to whine. "What is it?"

"Lights, like the sparks from a campfire. Only they don't fizzle out and they're orange, and blue, green and colors I can't even describe. Un-colors, like blue-orange or green-red, colors turned inside out and spun around. It's totally...trippy." She glance at Jane. "You really don't see it?"

"No," said Jane, a little wistfully. "I'm jealous."

"Of what?"

"You can see the things that Loki talks about."

Darcy reached and took Jane's hand. "Now...?"

Jane squinted into the black. "I-maybe." She blinked. "It's like spots before my eyes, but a little brighter. I don't see any colors, though."

Determined to let Jane see what she could, Darcy took back the detector. Keeping her hand in Jane's, she dragged her forward onto the next bale of hay. "Darcy, we really need to call Thor--"

"Yeah, in a second." The sparks grew brighter and the roots of her hair tingled, like her hair wanted to stand on end. She felt the pull of something farther ahead, a point about three feet off the ground where the sparks coalesced and spun, the colors churning and mixing. In a couple more steps she reached it. If the detector had awoken her ability to see the magic, then maybe if she stuck it in the color vortex, where everything seemed to originate, it would jump start something in Jane's vision. She bent and thrust the detector into the roiling lights.

Behind them, the dogs abruptly stopped their whining and all sound ceased. In front of her, the sparks kept swirling for several heartbeats and then slowed. "Darcy, what did you do?" said Jane, breaking the silence.

"I-oops." The sparks had stopped moving and Darcy's vision shuddered like a shaken camera. Something, Jane, tugged and then yanked hard on her hand, dragging her off the hay bales. Staggering backward, her foot hit a soft spot in the hay and the stomach-dropping sensation of falling hit her.

Her fall was stopped by Jane and the two tripped and stumbled off the bale and fell in a graceless pile on the floor. The dogs began to bark hysterically. Back in the darkness of the hay canyon, the sparks started to zig and zag in random directions, pressure built in Darcy's ears, and then something popped, like a muffled gunshot. Magical sparks flew outward in all directions, like rats fleeing a sinking ship, accompanied by a spray of hay. Darcy and Jane cringed, the hay scratching and poking their skin.

And then it was over just as quickly as it had began. The two women sat on the concrete floor, eyeing the place where three hay bales had sort of imploded *and* exploded. Some of the sparks were still floating around, but the magical structure, it had been a structure, was destroyed.

"Oh, man, Loki's going to kill me. I mean, he said he'd never hurt me, but he'll find some not-painful way to do it. I'm dead, I'm so dead-Darcy walking." She removed her glasses and wiped the greenish-tan hay dust off the lenses.

"I told you to call them," said Jane, climbing to her feet and trying to brush hay from her clothing,

which was difficult, since some of the stems were impaled in the cloth.

On cue, the heavy tread of footsteps sounded from outside the barn. Darcy scrambled up, shoving her glasses back on and trying desperately to removed the hay evidence from her hair and clothing.

Thor stood in the doorway, golden and blazing with formidable strength, Mjölnir in his hand. Loki was at his side, sharp gaze taking in the room, his magic surrounding him like a terrible presence all its own, the magical orb light brightening the room. On the battlefield, the sight of the duo probably would have left their foes with soggy, yellowed underpants. After several months of sharing the same roof with the two, Darcy's first reaction, however, wasn't dumbstruck awe, but instead the urge to pull out her cell phone and take a photo.

Her hand was reaching for her backpack, when Loki leveled his gaze on her, penetrating stare measuring her for an extra set of limbs and pair of antennae.

"It's her fault," said Darcy, pointing at Jane. Jane shot her a "What the Hell?" look and Darcy leaned toward her and did a stage aside. "He can't turn you into an insect because...Thor."

Loki marched over, an angry, black-haired, alabaster demon whose frustration preceded him, pulsing against her skin. He loomed over her and she smiled crookedly up at him. "Are you injured?" he asked, appraising her with eyes that still glittered with menace. He plucked some hay from her ponytail.

"Nuh-uh."

"The problem with friendship is that it engenders familiarity," he observed, his thumb tracing a stinging spot on her cheek where she'd been scratched by flying hay. "Even if you were a good liar, I'd still know you were responsible for," he looked at the mess, "this, because it shrieks 'Darcy was here.'"

"Sorry?" she said, hopefully.

"Is there any scenario where I might leave you alone and you won't get into trouble?"

She lifted her right hand, fingers curved as if holding a large sphere. "Invisible Magic 8-Ball says, 'No.'"

"What happened?" asked Thor, who was trying, ineffectually, to rid Jane of the hay in her hair.

Surveying the room, Loki answered for the women. "They found the framework for the exit portal and somehow," he narrowed his eyes at his mortal lover, "Darcy managed to tear it apart."

Hoping the second time would be the charm, Darcy smiled, adding a bit of sexy to the expression and said, "Sorry."

"Sorry?" His voice rose, a deep furrow between his eyebrows. "You are lucky to still be alive, you..." He clenched his jaw shut, pulling his angry gaze up to the ceiling, muscles in his neck taught with anger. "If the structure had been newer, still filled with what Jane calls potential energy, the backlash would have held enough power to rip you into tiny pieces."

Feeling eyes on her, she turned to see Jane watching her as Thor continued de-haying her clothes. "I could have gotten Jane killed," she said softly. The image of Sean with blood running down the side of his face after the explosion at Edwards's shop flashed before her and she sagged, heavy with guilt, feeling stupid.



"But you didn't," said Jane, coming to her defense. "And I think I saw magic. A little. Right before it all came apart."

"I used your trick," Darcy said to Loki, "I touched her and she saw a little. I was just trying to let her see more." She shut up because her voice was horribly whiny and he was still glaring at her, probably imagining all kinds of painless ways to shut her up permanently.

"Tell me what you saw," he said, reaching a hand behind her head and undoing the band on her hair. With brisk efficiency, his clever fingers shook out her hair and started to comb away the hay. Because she was still wearing the baseball cap, she only had hay in her ponytail.

When she was done describing the structure, he handed the hairband back to her and lapsed into silence, attention on the epicenter of the small disaster. In a few long strides, he was standing by the spot, anger easing from his tall body as he studied the remains of the portal. He wiggled his index finger in a beckoning motion and the light orb came to his hand. Obviously, not aware of what he was doing, he turned the light in his right hand and then batted it towards his left, then back to the right like a slow tennis ball. Darcy watch him repeat the action, which was oddly playful and for some reason made her ache for him.

"What can you tell, Loki? Is it the same as the entry point in the desert?" asked Thor.

Loki nodded and faced them. "This one was more substantial, meant to carry the traveler a longer distance."

"Wait," said Jane. "You said, 'entry point.' There was another portal."

"Yes, Thor and I found the containing structure of such an portal. The portal itself long gone." He gestured back at the dark gap in the hay. "What remains is like," he paused, searching for an analogy, "like the spent casing of a bullet." He moved toward a wall and put his hand on the exposed wooden framing. "This portal, designed for a greater distance, needed a physical structure to support it."

"So the killer came here from someplace close, but then left for somewhere far away," said Darcy.

"Exactly." Loki eyes were on her, fortunately no longer looking as grim. "And the killer is likely an elf."

Any response to his pronouncement got cut off by the dogs, who jumped up, and hurried to the door, tails wagging.

A dark-haired woman stepped through the doorway. "Who the hell are you and what are you doing on my property?"

Darcy's mouth hung open, any intelligible response stolen by the sight of a shotgun leveled at her and her friends.

## Chapter End Notes

Quick thank you to all who have read this here. I remembered a while back that I'd started, but didn't finish posting this here, and I don't like leaving stuff undone.

I've been cast in a play (first ever and a paying gig, no less, glurk), and am busy

fleshing out my character and learning lines, so I'm not online that much. But thank you to all who've left kudos or comments. They are much appreciated!

## Chapter 25

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Darcy stared, mesmerized by the dark tunnel of the gun barrel, her mind going to the Taser in her backpack and then realizing the futility of bringing a Taser to a gunfight. These thoughts went through her head in the span of less than a second before her view of the shotgun was blocked by Loki's back.

"We mean no harm," said Thor, who had moved to shield Jane. He held one hand up, the other surreptitiously holding Mjölnir out of sight. Jane, however, rendered his chivalry pointless by surprising everyone and taking the initiative, probably because she was afraid of what Loki might do.

"Hi, Mrs. King." She slipped out behind Thor, holding up her SHIELD ID. "My name's Jane Foster and I work for SHIELD. I think you may have spoken with some of our agents a few days ago?"

The ID didn't exactly resemble a badge, but it had bar codes on the bottom, a watermark behind Jane's information and photo, and gave the impression of being the kind of thing that belonged to people who were doing something official for the government. Darcy, peeking out from behind Loki, could see that Jane's hand was shaking slightly, a reasonable reaction to being one twitchy trigger-finger from a face full of buckshot.

"Maybe," said Ruth, squinting at the ID, eyes darting back toward Thor and Loki. Darcy considered showing her ID, and then decided it would be best not to call attention to herself. Besides, she knew Jane had just -- Snap! -- broken a huge rule by admitting that SHIELD existed. Jane, whose big brain could deliver a way to build sparkly rainbow bridge in SHIELD's backyard, probably wouldn't get more than stern lecture for the infraction. But if Darcy -- already an annoying thorn in Nick Fury's side -- also started throwing around the S-word, she'd probably end up in a jail cell with no chance of conjugal visits from her favorite supervillain.

"We, um," Jane glanced back pointedly at the stacked hay, "got a call that there had been a strange energy reading at your property. When we got here, we found this." Jane stepped out of way, letting the woman see the damage. Ruth eyed the four warily. She stood about Darcy's height; her black hair, speckled with gray, was pulled back in a single French braid. According to the background check, Ruth was forty-eight, but she looked fit and trim in jeans and a blue blouse. Sidling past Jane, she walked deeper into the barn.

"What the hell?" Confronted with the destroyed hay bales, Ruth's aim wavered from the four, much to Darcy's relief. She had no doubt that Loki would protect her, but the matter of "how," was a little worrisome.

"Several of the hay bales have exploded. Have you ever seen anything like this before, Mrs. King?" said Jane, who was starting to sound more secure in her role as secret agent.

"No." The woman sounded tired and defeated, and guilt gnawed at Darcy for making her life more complicated. Mrs. King shifted the shotgun so that its barrel rested against her shoulder, dangerous end threatening the roof. "You're with that outfit south of here, out in the desert, Puente Antiguo's own Area 51."

*Right down to the aliens*, thought Darcy, moving to stand next to her personal close encounter. Jane nodded and said, "Yes. I understand you must be tired of questions, but we were hoping you could

answer just a few more."

Ruth's dark brown eyes narrowed. "I told your people everything I know, which is really jack shit, because," she blinked rapidly, voice breaking, "what the hell do they expect me to know about something like this?"

Jane's shoulders slumped, as she struggled with what to say next to the grieving woman. Loki took a step forward. "Nothing, Mrs. King," he said, soothingly. "We don't expect you to know anything about the manner of your husband's death."

Ruth looked up at Loki, as if noticing him for the first time. In the flickering light of the fluorescent bulbs, his thin handsome face had an unearthly cast, made paler by the contrast from his ink black hair, but that was offset by his disturbingly mild expression. Darcy swayed, dizzied by the sudden arrival of this un-Loki - earnest, young, without a trace of the emotional wear and tear of centuries of life. She turned away, staring at the random splatter of greenish-yellow hay on the concrete floor, deciding that she preferred the honesty of embittered, grumpy Loki.

"The problem is, SHIELD knows very little about the murderer's methods, either." A hint of derision shaded Loki's pronunciation of "SHIELD" but Darcy doubted Ruth noticed. Loki glanced right and left and then leaned slightly toward her. "The truth is, there have been two similar murders, the first two victims were guards at the facility. I and my colleagues," he indicated the other three, "believe the perpetrator is one of ours."

Ruth's fingers absently tapped the gun's wooden stock, an idea coming to light in her eyes. "The two people Arne saw leaving Pete's shop. Arne thought they were employed by your people, but the agents who interviewed me said they weren't." She frowned. "That was a lie, wasn't it? Those two did shoot Mark."

Darcy felt her face burning and she lowered her head, studying the floor, hoping Ruth hadn't seen the photos on Arne's phone.

"They did lie to you," said Loki. Darcy shot him a startled look, noting that he clearly enjoyed casting aspersions on SHIELD's credibility. "The two people your husband saw are SHIELD employees, but," his face was almost beatific in its sincerity, "neither was the cause of Mark King's death."

"Yeah? So what were they doing there?"

"They were friends of the deceased guards and had found a connection between Peter Edwards and the murders. Both are civilian employees with no training in explosives or weapons. Theirs was merely a misguided attempt to solve a murder."

"If it wasn't them, then who? And why," Ruth's voice broke, "is my Arne dead?"

Her stare returning to the floor, Darcy gulped, the woman's pain eating at her belly and stealing her breath.

"We don't know, Mrs. King. There appears to be a link between Peter Edwards and the murderer. If we can establish this connection, we might find your husband's killer." Loki's voice was resonant with velvety comfort, even compassion. Darcy shivered, thinking, *This, this is the proof that Loki wasn't in his right mind when he attacked New York*. He had to know the effect that he had on mortals, didn't he?

Lifting her gaze to scene before her, she imagined the same scenario playing out thousands of years

ago: Thor and Loki standing before grubby, awestruck mortals in a Bronze Age village. Back then, when life expectancies didn't go beyond 40, the princes' charisma would have been magnified by their perfect skin, hair, teeth, and absurd height. Darcy's attention moved to Jane -- Jane, who tolerated Loki mostly because he was the snotty price for playing naked twister with the God of Thunder -- Jane, who was currently staring at Loki in astonished wonder.

For Loki, who'd been charming the IQ points out of humans since the time they'd first stood upright, using an army to conquer Earth was like doing home repair with Mjöltnir. She pushed her glasses up her face, noting that Loki's suave persona didn't do much for her and wondering if sexy time with him gave her some kind of immunity to his charisma.

Ruth King, who lacked Jane's antagonism as a buffer against Loki's charming and truthful mendacity, blinked slowly and then nodded. "I have to feed the horses," she said, glancing down at the dogs who had arrayed themselves in a panting heap at her feet. "Then we can go in the house and talk."

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Thor, probably recognizing that he wasn't going to be much use as a pretend secret agent, contributed to the mission by helping Ruth feed the horses, carrying a bale of hay and a large coffee can full of grain to a metal feeder in the corral. Mjöltnir hung at his waist, but Ruth didn't seem to notice. Instead she watched as the blond prince moved with confident ease around the pushy, thousand pound animals, and observed, "You've worked with horses some, I'd say." Thor nodded politely at the understatement.

While Thor played over-muscled stablehand, Darcy wandered back into the barn and collected the magic detector from where she'd dropped it. Shoving it back in her backpack, she emerged from the barn and followed everyone into the Kings' house.

The Kings' front door opened to a short entryway where coats hung on a rack, waiting for winter. The living room beyond was large, with orange saltillo tiles on the floor. Two scuffed, tan leather sofas made a "V" in front of the television. A small desk with a computer took up a small nook in a corner of the room. An Amado Peña print of two Native American women, depicted with the artist's signature flat profiles, hung on one wall, but the rest of the wall space was taken up by photos, some obviously old, the newer ones being shots of the Kings' two daughters. The girls, Ruth had explained, were still in Los Alamos, but someone had to come home and feed the animals.

"These four need their dinner. Have a seat," Ruth said as she continued toward the kitchen, the dogs following eagerly at her heels. The shotgun was still in her hands, but not threatening anything living. Still feeling a little glum from her failed attempt to show Jane magic, Darcy sank into a couch's leather and pulled her hair back in a ponytail, hoping Loki was right and that Ruth wouldn't recognize her. Lifting a hand to her face, she stopped. Ruth had already seen her with glasses; there was no point in going blind now.

Jane sat next to her, but the men remained standing; Loki wandering around the room snooping and Thor watching him as if he expected his brother to make off with the Kings' silverware. Loki held a framed photo in his hand when Ruth returned. Unabashed, he turned the photo toward Ruth. "Arnold?" he asked.

Glad for her glasses, Darcy could see that the photo showed a man with short, dirty blond hair, dressed in hunting camouflage, hands gripping the antlers of a deer that was now frolicking in the happy no-hunting grounds. He may have resembled the man who had attacked Darcy and Sean in town, but frankly, he also looked like every other generic white male in *Field & Stream* magazine.

"Yes," said Ruth softly. Turning, she set the gun down against the wall. "That's about four years old. Hunting trip in the Sangre de Cristos." Darcy could see weariness hanging heavy on the woman as she crossed the room and sat on the opposite couch.

Loki set the photo back on the computer desk and then sat on the couch near Jane. Thor remained standing, probably because Loki hadn't left him much room to sit.

Loki leaned forward, elbows on his thighs, posture relaxed and non-threatening. "In the past couple of months, had your husband made any new friends, associates? Anyone unusual or from out of the area?"

Ruth shook her head. "No. No one."

"But you are gone, in Los Alamos, most of the week," observed Loki. "Is it possible--?"

"Yes," she said, snappishly, but Loki didn't react with his usual arrogant indignation, his mien still radiating harmless charm. "Anything is possible. He could have been dating a supermodel behind my back."

Darcy glanced at Arnold's photo and thought, *Only in his wet dreams*, and then felt bad about thinking snarky thoughts about the dead.

"What was your husband doing at Edwards's shop, the night of the explosion?"

"He was trying to find Mark." Her shoulders rose and fell with a sigh, a long, unspoken backstory in her eyes.

"Mark was missing?" blurted Darcy, forgetting that she should keep a low profile.

"Mark was a drunk," replied Ruth bitterly. "And a selfish asshole, but Arne loved him." She rubbed her eyes. "I guess I'm a real bitch for talking about Mark that way, now that he's dead, but it's true. Arne and the rest of the family tried to get Mark help. Over and over. But you can't help someone who doesn't want help. I told Arne this: 'Mark's trying to destroy himself.'" She reached behind her head and fiddled with her braid. "Arne's latest plan was to keep Mark busy, too busy to drink. So he'd been calling him out here to help with the ranch.

"Mark didn't answer his latest call and Arne figured he was hiding out at Pete's shop, drinking."

"Why didn't he notify the authorities when he saw the young woman and man enter the shop?" asked Loki.

At that, Ruth grimaced. "Because he was starting to buy into some of Pete and Mark's conspiracy theory bullshit. Pete had this theory that you people had some kind of alien technology that controlled the weather and that's why we're having this terrible drought."

Darcy and Jane, neither destined to be great Poker players, darted a quick glance at the thunder god in the living room.

"The ranch is bringing in less and less every year," continued Ruth. "We have to buy more feed. There's no grass on the range. Arne was getting so frustrated, scared that we'd have to sell and move to Albuquerque. He isn't, *wasn't*, gullible, but a man can only take so much." She was interrupted briefly by the DachsoLab, who wandered into the room and leaned against her legs, tail wagging.

"You know, it's funny," continued Ruth, her hand absently toying with the dog's floppy ears, "but

Arne used to make fun of Pete's stupid theories. Then, right after that explosion in town, not at Edwards's place, but the one they say was caused by a gas leak..." Her voice trailed off, eyes filled with the realization of what she'd said. "Hell. We've had a lot of those lately, haven't we?"

Darcy nodded, making a point not to look at Loki because seeing him in all-out-liar mode was making her uncomfortable.

"Anyway," said Ruth, "right after that explosion, Arne started to buy into Pete's crackpot theories."

"Was Arne in town the day of the first explosion?" asked Loki.

Ruth nodded. "He was over at Ruckley's Guns and Ammo when most of it went down. I doubt he saw much, but the authorities kept him there, asking questions, until the next morning."

At this Darcy did look at Loki, pieces trying to fall into place in her mind. Loki said nothing, his silence prodding Ruth to continue speaking.

"The night Pete's shop was destroyed, Arne recognized the guy -- I think his name is Sean -- knew he worked for you people. He decided to do some investigating of his own, hung out about a block away, snapped some photos with his phone."

"And after the explosion?" said Jane. "Why did he go to Izzy's and show the photos there instead of taking them to the cops?"

Pain and frustration made hard lines on Ruth's face and she closed her eyes. When she opened them, she swept a desolate look at them all, her gaze stopping on Loki. "Because he loved his brother, so much. Too much. When he heard Mark was dead, he got drunk, stupid drunk." A suggestion of pleading touched her face. "You've got to understand. He wasn't a drinker, nothing like Mark. But he was heartbroken, devastated. He thought he failed Mark. He always thought Mark was his responsibility."

Ruth's eyes grew dim with misery and a hint of bitterness. "Nobody, least of all me, could convince him otherwise."

Like twins, both Darcy and Jane looked at Thor. The big guy was watching the woman, his expression unreadable. Loki, however, nodded and said, "Thank you for your time, Mrs. King. You have been very helpful." He stood and Darcy followed quickly, probably a little too quickly. The combination of the woman's grief, Loki's effortless duplicity, and Darcy's own concern that she'd be recognized was starting to make her head hurt.

Fortunately, Darcy's concerns that Ruth might take a look at her and know she was one of the two people Arnold accused of killing his brother seemed to be put to rest by Thor and Loki. Ruth's attention kept flicking over to the two men, mostly Thor. The woman had just lost her husband. She wasn't crushing on either guy, but what flesh and blood, hetero woman could resist staring at the two unnaturally good looking men in her living room?

Or at least, so Darcy thought. They were outside in the dark, headed for the car, when Ruth called out, "Wait!" When Darcy turned, she found Ruth moving quickly toward them, staring straight at her. "You're her. The woman who broke into Pete's shop."

Darcy's hands tightened on her car key, metal biting into her skin. Behind her, she heard light footfalls, Loki approaching. "I didn't break in," she said, too stressed-out to bother with denial. "The, uh, door was unlocked." Ruth stopped a couple steps away, her dark eyes locked hard on Darcy's. Unnerved, Darcy took a step back, colliding with Loki. His hands settled on her shoulders.

"Who are you people, really?" said Ruth.

"Sh-she's Jane Foster, just like she said," answered Darcy, gesturing to where Jane stood by the car's passenger side door. "We do work for SHIELD. We're just not agents, exactly. Jane's a physicist." What the hell was Thor? Loki? As Sean had noted, neither was on payroll. One, however, was a hero, the other, the reason the world needed heroes. Neither man, like Darcy, had given Ruth his name.

"She and her friend thought Peter Edwards's grudge against SHIELD justified a bit of poking around," said Loki in his soothing tone. "They meant no harm."

"The murdered guards were my friends," explained Darcy.

Ruth studied her in a wearied way that indicated she was suffering from information overload. "So did you and your boyfriend find anything at Pete's place?"

"Sean's not my boyfriend. He is." She pointed her thumb back at Loki before she realized what she was doing. *Boyfriend? Shut up, Darcy.* "We found evidence connecting Edwards to the murders, but now it looks like it was planted by someone else," she admitted.

Ruth King scrutinized her, obviously deliberating what to do next. Somewhere out in the desert, a coyote yipped and another answered. Behind her, Darcy heard Thor shuffle his feet. Then Ruth's shoulders slumped, and she looked away, shaking her head. "Christ. You're just a kid. Not much older than my girls." The woman's eyes panned up to Loki and then Thor beyond and Darcy could almost see some part of her subconscious recognizing that they weren't human.

"I'm so sorry about your husband," said Darcy. Because "sorry" always felt totally insufficient, she reached out and touched Ruth lightly on the arm. "We'll find the person who killed him. I promise."

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"SHIELD fiddled with Arnold King's memories and screwed up his brain," Darcy said, breaking the leaden silence that fell on the four as she drove along the bumpy dirt road. "That's why he started believing Peter Edwards's stories." Shooting a look over her shoulder, she caught Loki's slight nod. How much, she wondered, had Arnold "Arne" King seen that day? Had he come running over from Ruckley's and seen the giant, psycho robot blast Thor? How much rewiring had it taken for SHIELD to erase that memory from his mind?

"I still do not understand why the killer slew that woman's husband," said Thor.

"Me neither," said Jane. "Especially since it looks like both Peter Edwards and Mark King were innocent. The murderer was trying to set them up for Max and Andy's murders."

"I doubt 'innocent' is a moniker appropriate to either man," said Loki, familiar cynicism back in his voice. "Both, it appears, were convenient pawns in our adversary's game."

A hulking shape moved by the side of the road, and Darcy, nerves on edge, tapped the brakes before the car's headlights revealed a cow and her calf. The animals' eyes glowed in the light as they watched the vehicle approach and pass. "Who killed Mark King?" asked Darcy. "A gun isn't our killer's style." *Our killer, yuck.*

"No, it isn't," said Loki. "Mark King's murder may merely be an odd coincidence."

"In your snooping," said Darcy to Loki, "did you find anything about his murder in SHIELD's



records?"

"The bullet was from an M1911 automatic handgun and the wound wasn't self-inflicted," said Loki. Darcy met his eyes in the rearview mirror and he winked.

"So definitely murder," she said, slowing the car as it approached Route 8, "But not with ice." In the distance, to the east, she could see the faint red tail lights of another vehicle headed toward town, but there was no one else on the road at this hour.

"Arnold King," began Jane, lifting her hand and counting off on her fingers, "Max Sandoval and Andy Valenzuela. The three of them must have something in common, right?"

Recalling conversations with Max and Andy, Darcy replied, absently, "They were all hunters. But the killer probably isn't a pissed-off deer."

"Their commonality is their connection to the killer." Loki's voice was soft, his head turned watch the dark landscape, expression contemplative. "Whatever that may be."

Out of habit, Darcy flicked on the right turn signal, although it was pointless, since the only things around were cows. She turned the car onto Route 8 and began to accelerate, shifting to second, third, fourth, and finally fifth. Settling the vehicle into highway speed, she asked Loki, "Do you really think the killer works for SHIELD?"

He shrugged, attention still out the window. "That was a ploy, to give Mrs. King the impression she was being made a party to a deep, dark secret." Another shrug. "At the very least, he has an ally within SHIELD." He flicked a glance at her in the rearview mirror, and Darcy saw something furtive in his eyes.

She started to push him for more information, but Jane spoke first, "About the portals back on the Kings' ranch...? How do they work, exactly?"

Loki took his attention from the window long enough to burn a resentful glare at the back of Jane's seat and Darcy realized his faulty brain hadn't quite worked out the portals' operation. She was torn between wanting to smack him for glowering at poor Jane, and a powerful need to wrap her arms around his skinny body and assure him that he'd get his brain back, eventually.

"The entry point beyond the livestock enclosures wasn't so much a portal, but a tiny scar in reality. His method of travel is crude, but effective. He constructs a physical entry portal which serves as locus for holding and releasing the necessary energy to slip into the spaces between. You might liken it to a magical catapult that propels him between places in reality. The farther the travel distance, the more energy is required and the more substantial the portal and the greater the rift when he emerges."

"The entry point at the ranch was small. That's why you think he didn't come from very far," stated Jane.

"Yes. Likely from town. His use of the barn's structure suggests that he relies on existing structures and adds the necessary magic and tithes to contain power."

"Ah," said Thor, as though suddenly understanding something.

"Tithe?" said Darcy. "Like a church thing? Money?" Not that she had any firsthand experience with religion, but shady televangelists loved the word.

"A tithe is a price, usually paid in pain, for increased magical power. It is characteristic of elf

magic."

"Oh," said Jane and Darcy, echoing Thor's earlier understanding.

"Do I even want to know more about the pain part?" said Jane worriedly. Darcy grimaced, her imagination too helpfully pulling up images of sharp cutting tools.

"Iron," said Loki. "The bane of elf-kind, the anathema to their magic. But enfolded into a magical construct, the agony of iron or steel opens the elf up to channeling more power." He sniffed. "Tis a trick of an inferior sorcerer."

The little green numbers on the dashboard clock read 12:08 and Darcy yawned. "Nails and screws are made of steel, right?" she said, amazed that her brain could work at all.

"Those in the barn's structure, yes," said Loki. "The rest is fashioned of wood, which absorbs elf magic like a sponge. Likewise, the hay."

"What you said about the killer having an ally in SHIELD," said Jane, rubbing her eyes tiredly. "That must be true, since the facility is made of tons of steel. No elf could stand it, right?"

"Doubtful," said Loki, the furtive look returning along with a hint of confusion.

"What are you thinking?" said Darcy, suspecting that he wouldn't tell her.

"That you should pull over to the side of the road," he said, some of his early charm returning. When she started to ask why, he looked pained and muttered, "Please."

"Need to free Willy?" she said, as she slowed the car. "Water the landscaping?" Jane snickered and Thor, of course, looked confused.

When the car stopped, Loki got out, marched over to the driver's side, and opened the door. "Out," he said.

"Uh, no," Darcy replied, because she didn't like orders. "Did reality stop taking your calls again?"

"We're on the best of terms," he said. "Which is why I know Thor and I will survive the wreck when you fall asleep and drive off the road. You, however, won't." He bent and unsnapped her seatbelt. Though his hands were gentle, there was no resisting his strength and she was hauled out of the vehicle.

"You do know cars don't drive themselves, right?" she said, as they stood by the side of the road. She had her hands on his chest, because she'd take any excuse to touch him.

"With the correct application of magic, they might." Bitterness shadowed his face briefly. "But this one won't. I'll drive."

"Dude. You don't drive. And...and...it's a stick."

"Five-speed manual transmission. I know." He grinned. "Who else? Jane's as tired as you."

The rear door opened with a light creak and Thor emerged. "I could," he said.

Loki sneered at his brother. "The Jeep?" was all he said, referring to Thor's attempt to operate a vehicle on a recent Avengers adventure.

Thor opened his mouth and then nodded, grinning sadly. "That did not go as planned, did it?" Thor

had been driving a Jeep off-road when it skidded in mud. He had overcorrected, and wrenched the Jeep's steering wheel so hard, it tore off the shaft.

Darcy stared up at Loki and sighed.

"I've seen it done enough and..." he flashed an impish grin, "I'm Loki."

"That's not reassuring," she protested as he maneuvered her, opened the door opposite Thor and pushed her into the seat.

A few seconds later, Jane eyed Loki as he adjusted the driver's seat. She turned to Darcy. "You know, if he crashes your car, your insurance probably won't cover the damage."

Darcy nodded. "Because they'll claim it was an 'act of god.'" A god with a history of extreme property damage. But now, out of the driver's seat, her body was already giving up, her eyelids falling like heavy stones. The car jerked a few times as Loki made the usual noobie mistakes with the clutch, but soon after they were zipping down the road toward town.

Her intention was stay awake at least long enough to make sure he didn't go all Carmageddon in town, but her intentions only paved the road to the land of forty winks. She awoke to the crunch of gravel under tires, and the front porch's light in her bleary eyes.

## Chapter 26

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

"I'm awake," proclaimed Darcy, because after her brief midnight nap, she was abruptly wide awake, with the sinking feeling that this would be one of those nights where she didn't fall asleep until ten minutes before her alarm did its thing. "What did I miss?"

"You all snore like trolls," said Loki as he got out of the car. Thor yawned expansively and fumbled sleepily with the door handle. Jane was rubbing her neck, probably from sleeping with her head against the window.

"No one was awake?" Darcy frowned at Thor in particular. "Student driver at the wheel and we *all* fell asleep?"

Thor's eyes narrowed, a bit of his princely upbringing surfacing at being scolded by the lowly research assistant. Turning, he looked forward, out the windshield to where his brother stood by the car's front fender. "Were it just Jane and I in the vehicle, he might have merrily driven us off a cliff." When he met her eyes, she could see a strange maturity in his face, a reflection of his father, maybe. "But Loki would not needlessly risk harming you and if something had gone amiss, he still had some magic. Your worries are without merit, Darcy."

He left the car with surprising speed for a guy his size, and for a moment Darcy was left staring at his empty seat, only the banal scents of laundry detergent and Jane's shampoo left in his wake. Slightly chastened, she blew out a breath, thinking this was her evening to get admonished by the brothers Odinson.

When she got out of the car, Jane and Thor were already up the stairs, their footsteps falling in alternating light and heavy clomps on the wooden porch. Loki still waited by the front of the car, staring off into the dark eastern horizon.

Darcy walked up to him and he held out a hand, key ring dangling from his index finger, chrome glinting yellow in the porch light. She took the car key back and started toward the house, pausing briefly at the front of the car to surreptitiously check for damage, in particular, the remains of splattered pedestrians.

"I thought you trusted me," said Loki, just a step behind her.

"I trust you with me, not the rest of humanity," she responded.

She heard the light sound of his laugh. "Wise girl."

Bic was still sitting on the porch's railing, looking droopy. Darcy scooped the creature up and found her cool to the touch, chilled in the cooler night air. Pressing the reptile gently between her palms, Darcy watched as Loki started toward the old airplane cabin.

"You want to be alone." It was statement, really, since she knew the answer.

He paused mid-step, turning his head just enough to look at her out of the corner of his eye. After a beat, he said, "No," and continued on toward his lair.

Surprised, it took her brain a few seconds to recognize the invitation. She hurried after him. "How did Ruth King sneak up on us? I thought nobody could get the jump on you."

"She didn't," he said, dropping heavily into an aisle seat in the very first row, long legs sprawled to the ragged edge of the cabin's floor. "I knew she had come home." His shoulders rose in a wry shrug. "The shotgun, however, was unexpected."

"*'Unexpected?'*" She sat next to him, on his left side, Bic still in her hands. "Guests are 'unexpected.' Loaded shotguns are 'Good thing I brought a change of undies.'" He gave her a bemused look, mouth twisted wryly. "What?" she asked. "Too crass?"

"And crude," he said. "But very you."

Between her palms, Bic wriggled and Darcy lifted away her left hand, leaving the lizard sitting on her right. Loki held out his hand, palm up, his fingers inches from hers. "Give me the little beast." Bic, still dopey, leaned sideways away from his hand, mouth open, threatening flames.

"She remembers you trying to turn her into meat sauce, and dropping her face first on the floor," said Darcy.

"You're hers now," Loki said to the animal, indicating Darcy with a jerk of his chin. "Harm you and I risk her mortal wrath."

"Sarcasm noted, Mad Science." Nevertheless, Darcy tilted her hand, coaxing the reluctant reptile onto Loki's hand, which was difficult with a creature that could walk up walls and clung easily to her vertical palm. With some nudging, Bic sat on his hand, tail lashing. "She's pretty smart, you know. Thor and I taught her to toast a Pop-Tart."

"An invaluable skill," said Loki, dryly. He turned his hand, studying Bic in the pale blue light of the waning moon. "Remarkable," he said, a tiny smile on his lips that was echoed in his eyes.

"Yeah, she is," agreed Darcy in a quiet voice, although she suspected he meant something else.

"It is not all lost," he said, softly, his shoulders rising with deep breath. "This would seem an inconsequential trick. A Midgard reptile given the ability to spew fire, a dumb beast imbued with a spark of self-awareness, and pulled through the between to a laboratory below the earth." He gave Darcy a small, closed-mouthed, crooked smile. "I've conjured far greater, but, despite its size, this little beast is no small magic."

"You're remembering stuff," said Darcy.

His eyes closed, a tiny tremor running through his body as he reined in habitual hard acrimony. "Not quite." He opened his eyes, curling his fingers into an almost-fist, then straightening them. Bic cocked her head nervously at his fingertips and started to trek up his arm, away from the risk of getting crushed in his hand. "Knowledge still evades my conscious mind, but my hands," he lifted his right hand and moved his slim fingers gracefully, "my hands remember."

His words were still flavored with dark bitterness, but Darcy also saw a bright spark of something new in his eyes. Hope, maybe? Her own heart soared like a kite for him, and then just as quickly, a kite-eating tree -- the fact that recovering himself meant he'd be lost to her -- yanked her emotions downward.

"That's good news, right?" she said. "Just relax and let the magic happen."

With quick frown at Bic who was perched on his shoulder (and eyeing Darcy's boobs), he shook his head. "Except our adversary can affect similar magic, without any handicap."

Darcy set her hand on his shoulder and rubbed her thumb over Bic's back. "The fake Asgard rose

was kind of like Bic, huh? Not an illusion, but actually changed?"

This earned her a very-Loki sneer. "I meant, his means of travel." He tilted his head at Bic. "Affecting true change on a living thing without killing it is difficult. A cut flower is a dying thing. Dead flesh is easily manipulated as it no longer has to carry on with the business of living. It can easily take any form, any modification that would break the living form."

"You know," she said, "the fact that you know that means there's more in that pretty head than crazy thoughts."

His sidelong look burned her with resentment and she wondered what set him off this time. He blinked and sighed, the exhalation apparently banishing whatever angered him, as his expression softened. With a tilt of his head, he batted his eyes at her. "Truly? You think I'm pretty?"

*I think you're a psycho, and I lo-like you anyway.* "No. Your face is too bony. You'd make an ugly chick."

His lashes fluttered with perfect effete charm. "You wound me."

"Freak." She rolled her eyes, wondering what had gotten into him and where she could buy it by the case. Beyond all logic, she liked embittered Loki, but the playful version was kindling a fire in her nethers.

Trying to think G-rated thoughts, she focused on the slight hollow under his left eye, just where the flesh began to curve up into his cheek. The shadows blurred his features, returning some of the youthful charm he'd used on Ruth. But his eyes didn't lie as they met her gaze, emanating the unimaginable weight of centuries of life.

He lifted his face skyward, to the dark sky busy with stars and her gaze roamed over his features. A shimmer of nerves ran up her spine as she slipped into a kind of in-between where a fragment of her mind gawped at the sharp beauty of his profile, thinking *"That's Loki, the Norse god; I had sex with Loki!"* and the rest shrugged, and thought, *"Tomorrow morning, when he's in Loki-coma, I'm putting makeup on him."*

She tried to follow his gaze to the sky, but as usual, set her eyes back on earth. "It doesn't look anything like the sky in Asgard, right?" she asked and Loki nodded. "Jane loves to sit out at night and look at the stars. I don't. It's too much of a mind-fuck."

With the obvious question in his eyes, he turned to her.

"The twinkle in those stars is a ba-gillion years old." Something flew across her line of vision, a nighthawk judging from the size. "Some of them are already dead, supernova-ed. Kablooey. All the fuzzy baby stars in nebulas are grow up now." A fierce weight of mortality and utter insignificance bore down on her. "All we see are ancient photographs and ghosts."

"By their estimations, I'm an infant," he agreed.

She nodded, a little grimly, at the idea of a two-thousand year old infant. "Thanks," she said, "for coming out tonight, for being...a little less Loki."

He arched an eyebrow at that. "You think I have no reason to find the killer?"

"Do you?"

"I do it for you, for the cause of your freedom." His expression was mocking but his left leg started

twitching slightly. "It's been your habit to travel to Albuquerque on your own, to visit friends or hunt discounted footwear."

"Shoes aren't going to buy themselves," noted Darcy.

"And now you cannot go, it isn't safe, not until the killer apprehended."

She studied him, careful to avoid looking at his leg, his tell, in case he realized what he was doing. And just like that -- Snap -- she knew she was in the deep end with no idea how to dog paddle. She didn't know which was worst: the fear that he'd pick up and leave her forever, or comments like this that suggested that he might actually care about her. Their eyes met and it was like looking over the edge of a deep, mist-shrouded canyon, knowing that jumping would be the end of her, and desperately wanting to leap anyway and fall forever through the clouded unknown.

"It's time I met Sean," he said.

Darcy snorted, that idea snapping her from her reverie. "That's so not happening. He's afraid of you. There's a better chance you'll send Odin a Father's Day gift."

"A tie with the words 'World Tree's Greatest Dad'?" he quipped.

Her jaw dropped at the joke and she scrutinized the man at her side. Raven black hair, butchered by Thor, the beauty school dropout? *Check*. Devastating good looks with sharp features that seemed to be draw with a ruler? *Check*. Definitely Loki.

Thrown by his humor, it took a second for her to follow his train of thought. "You think Sean is the killer's inside man."

"You don't?"

"N-no." The concept, instantly ridiculous, spoken out loud begin to make a touch of sense. "No!" she said emphatically. "Where's this coming from? Jealousy?"

"Of a foolish boy who caught the eye of Earth's loveliest maiden and couldn't manage more than a kiss? Unlikely." His voice was a warm sensual caress and his eyes shone with all the things that he had managed recently.

"Smooth," said Darcy, her voice cracking on the "oo" sound.

"What do you know about Sean?" Loki asked.

"He's an accountant, Assistant Comptroller at SHIELD. He's got great bone structure and dreamy blue eyes." She shrugged. "Okay, you got me. Not much."

"Sean O'Malley, son of Mary and Patrick O'Malley," recited Loki, no doubt from SHIELD's records. "Born 31 years ago in Chico, California. Four brothers, one sister. Attended California State University in San Francisco where he earn a Bachelor's degree in Business with a concentration in Accounting. He went on to attend Stanford where he completed a law degree."

"Stanford? He's a lawyer?" She could feel her eyes going wide as saucers. "He's 31? He looks younger." *What's a Stanford-educated lawyer doing working for the government?* Because she couldn't resist, she said, "I gave that up for an unemployed supervillain?"

"I prefer 'on sabbatical' to 'unemployed,'" Loki deadpanned. "After graduation, Sean O'Malley worked for the General Accounting Office, followed by the National Security Agency, before

coming to SHIELD. He has passed all three agencies' security checks."

"Squeaky clean. You suspect him, why?"

"He's been privy to most of your plans including the adventure at Edwards's Repair Shop that nearly got you killed." Anger blazed in his eyes.

"Nearly got him killed, too," reminded Darcy.

"Perhaps he knew about the explosives?"

"No, they were a surprise to him."

"Or his master thinks him expendable." Darcy had no response to that and Loki continued, "Sean controls SHIELD's purse strings. He is trusted and well-liked. Smuggling the documents you found in the repair shop out of SHIELD's facility would be a simple task for him."

Sean's words regarding Loki came to her: *"A lot of people at SHIELD say he hasn't paid for what he did here and elsewhere. Families missing their fathers, sons, brothers, daughters...they don't care what he's punished for, just so long as he's punished. He's a war criminal."*

"He doesn't seem to like you. Or Thor," she admitted, hating the doubt that started to infest her head.

Loki's dark eyebrows lifted slightly at the second part of her comment. "The guards, Max and Andy, were both fond of you, *despite* your association with me. Sean would have known that. Perhaps he saw their sympathies as a betrayal."

"But when I told him you and I were friends, he took it well," protested Darcy, recalling another conversation.

*"So do you hate me?"*

*"Because...you don't hate Loki? I don't know the person you know. I know what he's done, but I don't have a personal connection to the events here, in town, or in New York." A question started to burn in his eyes. "If you think he's changed..."*

Rather than responding, Loki just watched her, mild sympathy on his face. "Peter Edwards and Mark King ran afoul of Sean on the night of your encounter with them in town. Sean saw Edwards and King's hatred of me, and their anger at SHIELD for their cancelled work contract, as an opportunity to cast suspicion elsewhere."

Biting her lower lip, Darcy slumped in her seat, depressed. "Actually, I gave Sean the idea. I'm the one who pointed out that Mark King also worked as the handyman at Max and Andy's apartment complex. I assumed King gave the killer access to their apartments."

"Knowing your plans to visit Edwards's shop," said Loki, "Sean left magical residue and the incriminating file folder where you would find it."

"I...don't..." Unable to formulate a denial, she asked, "What about Arnold King? Why kill him? He didn't do anything wrong except love his worthless brother."

"Arnold King sealed his fate when he wandered, drunk, into the diner, and showed the photos of you and Sean leaving Edwards's Repair shop. His actions drew too much attention to Sean, or perhaps his master too, and so he was killed."



Darcy shook her head. "Even if Sean is part of this, he isn't doing it willingly. You're right. Sean is popular and has a lot of influence in SHIELD. He's the perfect tool for someone who needs access to-- "

"--the recordings from SHIELD's electronic monitoring devices," said Loki, a little too smugly.

"Sean's been brainwashed," insisted Darcy, stubbornly. She favored Loki with a hard look. "In the same way you made Erik and Hawkeye your puppets."

Without a trace of shame, Loki nodded. "A possibility. The compulsion would explain his avoidance of any contact with me."

"Because you would detect it." Hope warmed her chest. "If you met face-to-face, you could take the spell off him right?" She stood, excited. "Let's go out to his house, now! He won't be expecting us." Grasping Loki's hand, she tugged ineffectually, feet braced against the base of the plane's seats. "Come on. Let's get Thor!"

The expression he pulled from his repertoire was one she'd never seen before. The best she could come up with to describe it was "bemused enchantment." With no effort, he yanked her down onto his lap. "You are so enthusiastic." His breath was warm against her ear. "It makes me feel...old, and yet, very much alive."

"Loki!" Exasperated, she struggled to get up, just as the low rumble of a vehicle's engine reached them. The cause, one of SHIELD's patrol SUVs, slowed in front of the house. It passed the turnoff and then stopped, backup lights gleaming, reversed and turned into the gravel drive.

Darcy squinted through the glare of the headlights -- the vehicle was pointed straight at Loki's lair - - and shivered with the fear that Nick Fury would emerge from the SUV bearing more bad news. A sigh left her lungs in a rush when two ordinary guards exited the vehicle. She watched them approach for too long, before realizing she was still sitting in Loki's lap.

Scrambling to her feet, she waved and said, "Hi." Loki rose and stood by her side.

"Miss Lewis," said the taller of the two guards. His absurdly thick eyebrows looked like they'd been drawn on with a black Sharpie marker. "Is there a problem?"

"Nope." She smiled and shrugged. "Couldn't sleep. Watching the stars."

The man and his partner, an African American man whose slightly misaligned eyes made him look like Forest Whitaker, both shot a glance at Loki. "You really shouldn't be out here alone, this late at night," said the guard.

Sweeping a look over Loki from head to toe, she replied. "Alone? Has he turned invisible or do I have an imaginary friend?"

The guard's bushy eyebrows came together like two mating caterpillars. "I see him, ma'am. I mean, you shouldn't be alone with him."

"I sleep across the hall from him every night. What's he going to do out here, that he can't do in there?" She could understand the guards' antipathy toward Loki, but it was a little late for SHIELD to start worrying about her safety around him.

Confused, Bushy Eyebrows glance at the trailer and back. Logic clearly wasn't his forte. The Forest Whitaker look-a-like spoke up: "Ma'am, to SHIELD, everyone in that house is an asset. And none of you should be outside, this late, not with a murderer still loose."

Darcy crossed her arms over her chest, in part because both men kept talking to her boobs. "Loki will pro--"

--take Miss Lewis back in the house," interrupted Loki. He gave the guards a thin, icy smile.

Both men tensed as though expecting a trick, but Loki simply put his hands on Darcy's shoulders, and turned her in the right direction. With the guards following, they continued on toward the house. As they walked through the front doorway, she saw him give the guards a sardonic wave before he shut the door and flicked off the porch light with flick of his fingers. He made a second motion that she recognized as his spell to temporarily disable SHIELD's bugs.

"Loki? Darcy?" Thor marched out of the dark hallway. "I heard voices."

"The mortals have medications for that," said Loki, plucking Bic off his shoulder and dropping her -- slowly, with magic -- to the floor.

"SHIELD's patrol, doing the usual drive-by," said Darcy, sparing Thor more not-brotherly love. "So, are we going to Sean's place?"

"No," said Loki.

"Sean?" said Thor. "Darcy's friend? SHIELD's treasurer?"

Darcy reluctantly explained Loki's theory about Sean to Thor. Midway through the story, Thor sat on the couch. When she finished, he stared wearily up at his brother. "Loki, we should never have let her spend time with this boy."

"*Let?*" said Darcy.

"*We?*" said Loki, with even more incredulity.

"We have little enough to do," responded Thor, with a touch of bitterness, "the least we can do is keep our mortal friends from harm."

"I'm no mortal's nursemaid," Loki said nastily. "And in this particular part of Midgard, adult women take a dim view of being told whom they can or cannot see."

"Um, guys..." said Darcy.

"You are usually so clever, brother," Thor stared down at his hands, clenched in fists, "how could you not see--?"

"I'm not your brother and thanks to your precious All-Father, I can scarcely remember my own name," Loki snarled. "Darcy trusted the boy--"

"Darcy trusts *you*," said Thor pointedly, his biceps bulging with the effort to keep his voice down, probably to avoid waking Jane.

"Hey!" said Darcy, indignant.

Loki, on the other hand, smirked at Thor. "Good point," he agreed.

"No," said Darcy. "Bad point. And what you mean by 'No?'"

"He means we need not be hasty and blunder," Thor grinned up at Loki, "into a matter we do not understand."

Some of Loki's earlier cheer returned as he said to Darcy, "Listen to the blunderer," canting his head at Thor, who took the slight with good humor.

Face with two obstinate immortals, her shoulders sagged. Trying one more tack, she said, "You said Sean's master thinks he's disposable, so the quicker we get Sean free, the better. His life's in danger."

"I was merely thinking aloud," said Loki. "On closer examination, that theory is unlikely. Our adversary would be wont to part with an asset like Sean."

"But the killer sent Sean, along with me, into Edwards's shop, knowing we'd get blown up."

"I don't believe he was aware of Peter Edwards's explosive burglar deterrent. Hence, Sean's surprise in the matter. You were to go in, stumble on the false evidence, and leave." Loki's gaze brushed over her, his expression grim. "If I am his ultimate target, then you are no good to him dead, either. Not yet."

Thor nodded. "If Sean is of value, then the villain will take steps to safeguard the boy's home, will he not?"

Loki eyed Thor, one corner of his mouth lifted in a wry smile. "A diet of Pop-Tarts has improved your mental acuity."

"Lo-ki!" grumbled Darcy, although the big guy took his brother's ribbing with a good-natured frown.

"Sean's home may well be protected by powerful spells," said Loki. "The sort that might destroy the entire neighborhood and many of Thor's precious mortals."

Thor stood and approached Darcy. "If we rush to your friend's home, we may well be playing into the killer's hand."

She stared up at the two men. "So we do what? Nothing?"

"By now, the killer knows we have visited Ruth and Arnold's ranch and he has probably surmised that I know he's an elf," said Loki. "He has no reason to suspect that we've cast our suspicions on Sean." He turned to Thor. "Don't speak of this to Jane until we are in the vehicle tomorrow."

Thor nodded. "Can he still reach Darcy through her dreams?"

"No," replied Loki. "That avenue is now blocked. Darcy will meet Sean tomorrow at lunch--"

"Darcy should not go anywhere near this boy!" protested Thor. "He is dangerous--"

"So am I," observed Loki, "and she's managed me sufficiently. It would be suspicious if she suddenly suspended all friendly overtures. They will be within SHIELD's walls, around others. What better place to confront the boy?"

"You mean to use Darcy as bait?" Thor's voice rose in outrage.

"I mean to *let* Darcy do what she is going to do anyway," said Loki. "If the situation were reversed, do you think you could keep Jane out of the matter?"

"I might," said Thor, though without much conviction.

"Centuries of experience, and he still knows nothing of women," Loki said to Darcy.

She grinned up at him and silence fell on the three briefly. Because the daytime heat had dissipated, the swamp cooler wasn't running and the only sound in the house was the hum of the refrigerator. The two demi-gods stood side-by-side, and Darcy was reminded of the first time they had stood there, or at least Thor stood, strong arms holding up a bloodied and barely conscious Loki. A few dime-sized stains still marked the place where Loki had bled on the carpet.

Where the Thor and Loki of memory had worn Asgard clothing, both now were dressed in mortal clothes, but neither entirely lost the aura of something extraordinary. At the moment, Thor's face was a lot like it had been back then, hopeful and a little worried.

Her eyes met Loki's and she somehow knew he was caught up in the same memory. He confirmed it by saying, his voice barely audible, "No Jane."

"What?" said Thor.

"We will sort out the details in the morning," replied Loki, brusquely. He strode toward Darcy, his tall frame emanating single-minded purpose. He had her hand in a firm grip and had towed her halfway down the hall, before she had the presence of mind to turn and wave at Thor. "Night." Thor shot her knowing smirk and she was glad the darkness hid her blush.

The taste-feel of cinnamon bled through her skin as Loki magicked her bedroom door shut. At the bed, he released her hand and stepped backward, pale hands dancing in the moonlight. Pressure built in her ears. He had put up a sound barrier in the room. His eyes, filled with the flame of dangerous intent, moved down and up her body, before trapping her in their mesmerizing heat. The tiny spear of fear in her head was drowned out by her body's desperate, throbbing need for him.

"Whuh-what are you doing?" she said.

Those graceful hands moved again and her glasses were off her face. "A demonstration," he said, "of all the things I can do to you in here, that I can't do out there." He gestured vaguely in the direction of his lair.

"I, uh-" was all she could manage, which coincidentally, was the most coherent thing she said for some time after.

## Chapter 27

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

On Tuesday morning, Darcy discovered an effective way to wake Loki. Unfortunately, it wasn't an experience she cared to repeat.

Until the dream hit, she was as comatose as Loki. His demonstration in the wee hours of the morning had taken her to heights of sexual pleasure she hadn't thought possible and left her supremely satisfied but as limp as a broken doll. Frankly, she didn't know where her brain's neurons got the energy to cook up the dream.

*The too-familiar scene unfolded before her: the trailer; her feet trudging toward the front steps. The world was cast in black-and-white except for Loki's armor. Loki, who lay in the usual location at the top of the stairs. Or maybe she just knew his armor should be green and gold, because did she ever really dream in color? The question lost all relevance when she saw the dusky-skinned woman with pale hair kneeling at Loki's side.*

*Feeling a sudden sense of proprietary jealousy, she took a step but got no closer. The woman's long, slim fingers clutched Loki's armor. In the distance, metal rang against metal and men cried out in pain or triumph. "They think it's him," said the woman, bending low and speaking the words to Loki. "They are wrong."*

*"Who's wrong?" asked Darcy, still trying to reach the steps.*

*Loki's body jerked spasmodically, the back of his head banging against the porch's wooden planks. The woman leaned lower, but spoke louder. "They are blind to his faults." For an instant, Loki was gone, replaced by the man whose face was a horror of ivory bone and charred flesh. Then Loki was back, his body seizing, blood trickling from his mouth in an inky line across his pale skin.*

*Darcy was running now and still making no progress forward. "You're hurting him!" she yelled, but her voice was just a faint whisper. "Thor! Help!"*

*The woman's face was beautiful, made more so by her grief. She stroked her fingers over Loki's face and his seizures stilled. "Blind to his crimes." Somewhere, a raven cawed three times and Loki's eyes filled with that terrible brightness. Turning on his side, he stared at Darcy without seeing her. The woman was gone and Darcy was making the agonizingly slow rush up the stairs.*

*His head in her lap, she combed her fingers through his ragged, black hair. "Loki, stay with me." White flashed as his eyes rolled back into his head, but then he was looking at her, really seeing her.*

*"I'm sorry," he said. The crazed, manic glaze began to return to his emerald eyes. "You're...okay for a mortal." His head jerked against her thighs and the light died in his eyes.*

*"Loki, no." As the elf woman had done, she grabbed his armor, except she yanked on the heavy layers of leather and metal at his shoulders, shaking him. "No. Don't you leave me. Loki, don't go!"*

*Grief fell on her, obliterating all emotions, even sadness, leaving an unbearable sense of nothing. Beyond grief, she fell into a void where all hope ceased. The hill, the lonely tree, and the noose beckoned. "No." Fingers still buried in his armor, she clung tightly as though her life depended on it. "Loki, don't leave me. Loki!"*

The raucous enthusiasm of mariachi music felt like a savior as it blared from her clock radio. She was at the very edge of the bed, shoved there by a long-limbed bed hog. Consequently, the radio was within easy swatting range. But even morning's light, a little dimmer as the days began to shorten with autumn's impending arrival, didn't banish the crush of grief and terror that still made her limbs feel like lead.

Turning, she crawled over to him, covering his body with hers. They were both still naked under the covers, but even so, skin to skin, she couldn't get close enough. She squirmed and tried to burrow into him, desperate to feel his heat, to hear the sound of his heartbeat, to know that he was alive.

And then she was on her back, shocking pain lancing through her shoulders where Loki's fingers dug into her flesh. The ugly memory of someone else holding her down tried to surface, but the dream's more potent emotions shoved it aside. Ignoring the dangerous rage in his eyes, she reached for him, trying to pull him back down to her. "No...don't...go," she said, her voice hoarse as in the dream.

He blinked. "Darcy?" His eyes moved to his hands and he let go, cursing in some strange language. He touched one of her shoulders with his fingertips, expression rueful. "You shouldn't--"

"You left me," she said, her own fingers clenching the hard muscle at his shoulders.

His brow wrinkled, confused, before understanding dawned in his eyes. Head cocked to the side, his eyes narrowed, and he sniffed the air. "The nightmare? Returned?" he said, angry and surprised.

"I don't know. It was like yesterday--"

"You had the nightmare, yesterday? And you didn't speak of it?"

"I-I thought it was nothing, just random stuff in my head." She could hear how stupid she sounded, but her usual response to his growing anger, flippancy, had been replaced with all the nightmare's angsty residue. She hiccupped a sob and tears flooded her eyes. "You were gone."

Even Loki apparently wasn't immune to the power of a crying woman. With a sigh, he scooped her up and flipped them both over, him once again on his back with her atop him. "I'm here. I haven't gone anywhere."

"You died." She blubbered into his chest, hating herself and trying to get control.

"I'm immortal, foolish girl."

"You said, before, everything dies."

She felt his sigh. One arm around her back, pressing her to him, he caressed the back of her head with his other hand. "Well, yes, but I don't plan on expiring anytime soon."

"Nobody 'plans' to die." She hiccupped again.

"You might have noticed, I'm rather durable." His fingers toyed with a section of her hair. "Besides, someone needs to keep you from destroying more buildings or haystacks."

His humor undid what little control she had achieved. She sobbed again. "It felt so real." Trying to suppress more tears, she let out a couple of embarrassing little squeaks before just giving in and crying.

"Shhhh." The easy rhythm of his fingers through her hair started to sooth her. "Whatever its origin, it was just a dream, my love. Just a dream."

Darcy's breath caught in her throat, as two words jarred some of her grief loose. Had he said what she thought she heard him say, without a trace of irony or condescension? *No*, she thought. *I'm hallucinating. Too much stress, not enough sleep.*

His fingers continued to slide through her hair, warm fingertips massaging her scalp. Beneath her, heat from his lean, hard body pulsed through the skin on her belly, thighs and chest. A comfortable malaise settled over her, and her breathing grew more even. She could have easily fallen asleep except for two things. Her boobs. Besides giving men an alternate focal point during conversation, her large breasts made sleeping on her stomach for any length of time uncomfortable, especially when the bed was made up of solid muscle.

The muscles in her arms trembled as she rose to her elbows and met Loki's eyes. "I don't suppose you could file what just happened with all your other AWOL memories," she said.

With eyebrows lifted toward his scalp, he smirked. "One of my few good memories? Are you mad?"

"Your idea of a good memory is watching me come unglued?" He didn't seem the least bit chastened by her words, so she tried another option and reached between his legs. "If your brain doesn't have blood, it can't form memories, right?"

"I don't know," he said, silkily, "but we should explore the matter, further. For science." Darcy, intrepid research assistant extraordinaire, agreed.

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"If you didn't cave so easily, she wouldn't beg," said Darcy to Jane. Unblinking reptile eyes on Jane, Bic had position herself on the table, directly in front of Jane, and was doing a little jig, lifting each skinny-toed foot with a flourish. So far, Jane had given her four tiny pieces of her breakfast bar and was now frowning at the lizard's continued mugging for more.

Breaking off another tidbit, Jane said, "I know. I'm weak." Thor laughed and got up to make more Pop-Tarts.

"Loki," said Thor, as his brother arrived and made the customary beeline for the coffee. Loki, customarily rude, ignored him. He poured a cup of coffee, watching, with more interest than usual, as Thor operated the toaster. Darcy, with her usual interest, studied Loki's ass and long legs. The sexy view reminded her that she hadn't taken an important pill that morning and she rose and made for the bathroom.

A Victorian claw-foot tub outfitted with brass hardware was this morning's display in the bathroom mirror. Imagining that tub filled with a nice hot bubble bath, she rotated her right, then left shoulder, the muscles still a little weak from a startled Loki's fierce grip. Since the injury hadn't been serious, he'd managed to heal the damage, but she still bore purple, fingertip-shaped bruises.

She was just swallowing pill and water when Thor's voice rumbled unhappily: "Lo-ki!"

Hurrying out of the bathroom and down the hall, she arrived in time to see a dozen very small, dark brown, chitinous forms hopping off the kitchen counter, their apparent origin being the toaster. Thor and Loki were still standing by the counter, the former staring at Loki and the toaster with dismay. With surprising cool, Jane reached out and grabbed Bic, who was ready to launch herself

off the table at Loki's mischief-made creatures and turn them to cinders. One of the things hopped across the carpet past Darcy and she saw that it was a cricket.

"The hell, Loki?" she said.

"He transformed my Pop-Tarts into insects," said Thor.

Loki seemed less than thrilled with his mischief. "They were meant to be spiders." He turned his gaze on Darcy, eyes narrow with speculation. "Come here." His commanding tone was 100-percent Prince of Asgard. Darcy took one step and then stopped, and cocked her head at him expectantly. "Please," he said, as though the word were made of razors.

He flipped open a cabinet door and retrieved the box of sugary breakfast food. With Darcy at his side, he tore open a packet and dropped the pastries in the toaster. She watched his hand shove down the toaster's lever. "Is the blood still...not in your brain?" she whispered. "You're not actually going to eat that?"

His answer was a quick series of fluid hand movements and a second later, the toaster's mechanism popped up and several large, bright blue spiders emerged.

"Ugh!" Darcy leaped back. Her boot heel skidded on the floor's cheap linoleum and she toppled backward. She heard Thor lunging toward her, but Loki caught her first. His strong hands around her upper arms, he leaned down, pulling her to his face.

"My magic works best when you are present." A strong undercurrent of suspicion swam through his green eyes. "Why?"

Mildly unnerved, Darcy offered him a weak grin. "Because I'm adorable and you love me?" Her grin turned into a grimace at the accidental use of the l-word.

He blinked and shot a sideways look at Jane and Thor. Releasing her, he distractedly rubbed her arms where he had gripped them. "No," he muttered, "it's something else."

Darcy's eyes went to the sky blue spiders, tarantulas actually, that were moseying around the countertop. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Bic wiggling in Jane's grip, desperate to attack creepy-crawly intruders. "Practice makes perfect," Darcy said, pointing at the arachnids. "Get rid of those things."

He obeyed her command without complaint. Pest control took the form of a casual flick of his fingers in the spiders' direction and all crumbled into bits of strawberry Pop-Tart. Full attention on Darcy, he eyed her as if she were one of Jane's homemade science gadgets and needed to be taken apart and studied. She opened her mouth for a snarky comment, but he snatched up his coffee cup, turned abruptly, and disappeared.

Darcy walked through the faint green mist where he had stood and sat back at the table. "That was weird," she said to Thor, "even for your brother."

Thor smiled thinly and started to speak, but was interrupted by a dog's bark. Another followed, the sound high-pitched, like a lap dog.

"Did someone's dog get out?" asked Jane, worry making a faint line between her brows. Darcy stood, ready to go outside and look, knowing what Jane was thinking. Small dogs and most outside cats didn't last long in the desert, the majority becoming coyote chow. Three more yaps sounded and Darcy tilted her head. "It's coming from under the house."



"No," said Thor, with a sigh, and a world-weary glance toward the bedrooms, "the sound is inside the house."

"The crickets...bark?" said Jane, going sort of cross-eyed with exasperation. Distracted, her fingers loosened on Bic and the lizard squirmed free. Bic bolted across the table, a streak of gray on reddish oak. In an instant the tiny defender of the household had disappeared behind the entertainment center.

"Bic! No fire!" commanded Darcy, immediately wishing there was a fire extinguisher in the house.

"LO-KI!" yelled Thor.

Three crickets burst from behind the entertainment center, yapping frantically, Bic in hot pursuit. The four disappeared under the couch, emerging seconds later with a larger pack of yelping, yipping crickets and a determined lizard. The scenario repeated with the loveseat and more crickets, the scene starting to resemble a weird fox hunt where the fox was chasing the hounds.

"Loki!" repeated Thor, stomping across the kitchen and toward the hallway. A hard bang of wood on wood followed -- Loki preemptively slamming the door in Thor's face. The sound of a large fist repeatedly impacting a door came next. "Loki, Darcy's little beast and your insects will destroy the house."

Jane jumped to her feet and followed her guy. "Thor, mortal construction, remember?" she said, an irritated edge in her voice.

The tiny hunt moved into the kitchen, announced by a chorus of barking crickets, and Darcy hopped up on the counter in case any of the bugs tried to run up her legs. The insects put a little distance between themselves and Bic as the lizard's claws skidded on the linoleum. The crazy chase went back into the living room and Darcy slipped off her perch and hurried to the front door.

Flinging the door wide, she called out, "Bic! Outside! Now!" The hopping mob of insects zipped under the couch and emerged in two groups, but Bic, with the efficiency of sheep dog, herded them back into one group toward the door. In seconds, the noisy aftermath of Loki's magical experiment was scurrying across the porch. Darcy slammed the door shut and puffed out a sigh.

Jane, who had returned to the living room, echoed Darcy's sigh. "I think we just introduced a new species to the New Mexico ecosystem."

Darcy looked down the hall, where Thor was still grumbling at Loki through the closed door. "Barking crickets? No biggie." She shrugged. "SHIELD introduced actual aliens." *And they're mating with the natives*, she thought with a smirk.

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Thor eventually gave up scolding his brother's door and returned to the kitchen to make more mischief-free breakfast pastries. Jane and Darcy sat at the table and went back to their breakfast bar and cereal, respectively.

"I don't know why you bother," said Darcy to Thor. "He's Loki. He is what he is."

Jane gave Thor a "See What I Mean?" look and he nodded.

"What?" asked Darcy.

"I believe you are a good influence on Loki," answered Thor, "Jane, however, thinks the two of

you will run off and start the Ragnarok." He rubbed his bearded chin. "I am beginning to see her point."

To this Darcy just grinned, enjoying the idea of being a bad influence on the God of Mischief.

In Jane's SUV, a while later, Loki's magic buzzed against Darcy's skin as he disabled any bugs in the vehicle. "Time to fill in Jane?" she asked, and he nodded.

Thor, clearly happy to be in-the-know for once, relayed the news that the killer's contact in SHIELD was probably Sean.

"You believe this theory?" Jane, although she was driving, risked a quick glance back at Darcy. "I mean...*Sean*? Really?"

"Believe?" Darcy shrugged. "More like it seems like the best possible explanation."

"But Sean? I've met him. He's sweet and," Jane's voice dropped to a low mutter, "not crazy." Thor turned toward Jane, evidently recognizing his girlfriend's dig at his brother and debating whether to come to Loki's defense.

"The sane never commit crimes?" said Loki, his tone more mocking than offended.

From where she sat in the backseat, Darcy could see Jane's right hand tighten on the steering wheel. "Yes, they do." There was something defiant in her bearing. "When I said 'crazy,' I meant, 'sociopath.'"

Loki gave her a condescending smirk. "What is it that a serial killer's neighbors always say? 'He was such a quiet, polite young man.'"

Jane nodded. "Isn't that what Thor always says about you?"

"Precisely," said Loki, cheerfully. "You are making my point quite well. Thank you."

With a slight shake of her head, Jane said, "I am, aren't I?" No one spoke for a few moments, while Jane processed what she had heard.

Thor spoke next. "Loki thinks Darcy should continue behaving as though all is as it was and spend more time with Sean." Darcy could see the hope in his blue eyes that Jane would agree that this was a bad idea.

Jane braked and halted the vehicle at the four-way stop, the burned-out and under repair barn to the right, the red van out front and distant whine of a saw coming from the interior. "That," she said. "That's the part that doesn't make any sense. Darcy's been with Sean alone, several times, sometimes at night, and he's never tried to hurt her."

"He tried to protect me when the building blew up," agreed Darcy.

"If he's been eavesdropping on the house, he knows Loki and Darcy are friends. If he knows, the killer knows." Jane glanced up at the rearview mirror, back toward the black SUV that followed. "If the murderer wants to hurt Loki, what better way to than to hurt Darcy?" Jane's shoulders shuddered at the thought. "So why didn't he take the opportunity?"

"Part of the game," replied Loki, his face devoid of emotion. "The guards and the other man were a message, a warning. He won't expend his capital -- Darcy -- until the game is nearly done."

"And if that time is now?" said Thor. "We are sending Darcy into the serpent's maw."

"There is little our adversary can do within SHIELD's confines. The structure's extensive steel framework would make it difficult for an elf to cast a complicated spell. And SHIELD does have a rudimentary magic-detection system." The spark of scorn in his eyes showed what Loki thought of that system.

"But you've gotten around the system," said Jane, finally moving the SUV through the intersection. "I didn't hear any alarms when you made Bic."

"Fury has the alarms set to 'silent' in the laboratory," said Loki. "For all his protestations to the contrary, the Director tolerates my abilities in that context hoping they will benefit Jane's research."

"So what do I do?" said Darcy. "Buy Sean lunch and then casually ask, 'Yo, met any evil-Legolas types lately?'"

Thor pulled a face. "Brother, you should conjure a device that translates Darcy's numerous Midgard references."

"And you should read a book," muttered Loki. He held a hand out to Darcy, palm up.

Because she trusted him, but wasn't stupid, she didn't pick up the thing that sat in his hand--her iPod. "I'm going to free Sean from the spell with Lady Gaga?"

Loki smiled. "I think an Asgard waltz would be more appropriate."

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Darcy's first impulse on reaching the Fish Bowl was to contact Sean right away, but Loki asked her, "Do you normally do that?"

"No," she said. "I usually shoot him an email right before lunch." Loki nodded and wandered over to the table and sat, his mannerisms saying, "Then do what you usually do."

Everyone settled into their usual roles: Thor making coffee and "talking" fantasy football with his fellow Avengers online, big fingers tapping with surprising nimbleness on Jane's iPad; Darcy wrestling the latest batch of data into the database, and Jane and Loki discussing the ins and outs of wormholes.

Darcy scrolled through her playlists, searching for something to make the task of staring at rows and columns of numbers less like a cure for insomnia. In the background, Jane chattered energetically at Loki about focusing quantum vacuum fluctuations on a theoretical mirror in order to create enough negative energy to generate a wormhole. Darcy grinned wryly at the realization that their nerd verbiage had almost started to make sense to her lately. She lifted her head and took in Jane and Loki's reflections in the glass wall.

The easy smile was on his face, but Darcy now recognized that, thanks to her insecurities, she had previously misinterpreted it as fondness for Jane. His good mood wasn't derived from Jane's presence, but rather the topic of conversation and, knowing Loki, the sense of superiority he got by lording knowledge over Thor's girlfriend.

Even in the watery reflection, Jane's eyes were bright with scientific curiosity as she quizzed him for the millionth time on how he perceived time and space. "So you see negative energy?"

"The correct term isn't 'negative energy,' it's..." Loki spoke some unpronounceable Asgardian word

and Jane nodded enthusiastically, paying no attention to his haughty tone.

"But you can see and direct it--"

With a finger tap, Darcy started the iPod and "Extreme" by Valora pulsed through the earbuds, cutting off the rest of Jane's words. A few inches away, Bic jumped up and climbed onto the computer monitor, settling on the top, tail dangling down over the screen. Distractedly, Darcy shoved the skinny appendage out of the way, still watching Loki. Beneath the surface, the dark despair of the dream lingered, stirring uneasy currents in her brain.

Maybe it was just nervous anticipation. In a few hours she'd meet Sean for lunch where she'd insist that he listen to her latest download. Because Loki didn't know exactly what kind of compulsion Sean was under, the Asgard waltz would simply make Sean temporarily agreeable to any suggestion Darcy made, including the usually out-of-the-question request that he accompany her back to the Fish Bowl to meet Loki.

The plan was simple enough, so why did a dense clot of dread linger in her belly? Before her, in the reflection, Jane said something and Loki favored her with a smile that was in the vicinity of friendly. Even in the reflection's murk, his eyes shone with intelligent clarity, nothing like the dull pall of death from the nightmare. She blinked through her glasses as the image of his handsome face, still and lifeless, kept replaying over his very much alive reflection.

*"You might have noticed, I'm rather durable."* Nodding to herself, Darcy recalled his words, attempting to find reassurance in them. He had after all, walked away from a beating that would have turned a normal being into a skin sack of pulverized bone and bloody goo.

In her mind's eye, recollection gave her the picture of another Loki, one with gashes carved like small crevasses on his skin, bones broken, and half blind. Taking in his perfect, unscarred skin, she wondered if Thor knew the truth of his injuries, that Loki's most dangerous adversary was Loki himself. The big guy wasn't as dense as Loki claimed. Maybe, like Darcy, he had figured it out but had the good sense to let Loki have this lie.

One thing was clear to her. To affect real damage to the God of Mischief, you needed to use magic, but even then his immortal resiliency usually won out. The killer could turn people into popsicles and travel using homemade wormholes, but Loki had survived for millennia, and if even a fraction of the stuff in mythology books was true, endured way worse than a few cuts and scrapes.

Jane, her posture energetic with inspiration, rolled her chair over to her desk and began sorting through the stacks of paper that were piled in a chaos that made sense only to her. Jane must have said something because Loki nodded before he glanced around the room and caught Darcy staring. This time, however, she didn't turn away from the intensity of his gaze. Why should she? They'd spent the last few nights making like explorers, mapping the topography of each other's bodies. He was hers, for the time being anyway, and she could watch him all she wanted.

His mouth turned up in a small smile that made it to his eyes, and Darcy froze, captivated by the exquisite, pale angularity of his features set against ebony hair and clothing. She was suddenly desperate to know what he look like beneath Odin's illusion, because as much as logic told her he was immortal, unchanging, invulnerable, a fear clutched her, as if this were the last time she would see him alive, the last chance to know the real Loki. Hit by the crazy idea that she was looking at a ghost, she spun in her chair, and met his eyes.

He tilted his head, eyebrows raised at her startled expression. Fortunately, Thor chose that moment to inadvertently be the hero and save her from any explanation. Rolling his chair closer to his brother, he gave him a friendly nudge. "Look, Loki," he said happily, pointing at the iPad and his

fantasy football stats. "See how well my imaginary warriors have done in this week's matches."

Darcy took the opening and skulked to the coffee maker for a refill before returning to her desk and burying her anxieties in the tedium of numbers.

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With the volume on the iPod set in the hearing damage zone, and struggling with a query that kept returning errors, Darcy didn't hear the chime of the Fish Bowl door. Instead Director Fury's entrance was announced by the scent of his leather coat.

With a light sniff, she noted that the scent of leather from Fury differed from any of the leather Loki wore, the Midgard stuff having a more stringent, chemical undertone. The odd tangent regarding leather tanning on Earth and Asgard still in her head, she turned and faced Fury, and heavy dread hit her hard.

Before her conscious brain even realized what she had done, Darcy was standing and had moved several steps backward. She pulled the earbuds from her ears and tossed them on the desk. "It wasn't us, we didn't do anything wrong," she said, out of habit and nervousness, even though Fury's demeanor lacked the usual stormy, bad cop vibe.

"Good morning," said Jane, no doubt deciding to opt for a normal greeting instead of Darcy's auto-denial. Thor nodded hello but didn't speak. Both shot Darcy a glance that indicated they wondered what she had done now.

"Morning," replied Fury, his cyclopean gaze taking them in, but for once, his expression was almost mild, almost cautious.

Even though her brain commanded, *Shut up, Darcy*, she babbled, "We were home all night, watching television, Monday night football, and then all us went straight to bed, well, not together, I mean, Thor and Jane together, and Loki and--" She took a gulp of air. "Home all evening, never went out."

Fury shook his head, the hint of a smile, though touched with sadness, on his mouth. "You really should leave the lying to your boyfriend." At Darcy's wide-eyed expression, he said, "Yeah, I know all about your trip out to Arnold and Ruth King's ranch last night."

"We, uh, you do?" Darcy said.

"Of course he does," said Loki, his expression inscrutable, but his posture wary, which was odd because he usually went out of his way to look bored in Fury's presence.

"You let us, let *him*," Jane pointed at Loki, "wander around, without an escort, late at night?"

"Director Fury is," Loki smirked at Darcy, "'making science.' He wanted to see what I'd do."

"That seems like a pretty risky experiment," Jane said archly.

Fury shrugged. "If you thought so, why did you go along last night?" Despite his words, he didn't seem to have the usual fire for an argument.

"Because," said Jane, exasperated, "Darcy."

Fury's response was another shrug, this one concessionary. Facing Darcy, he said, "I think you should have a seat."

Everyone's attention on her like a massive weight, Darcy felt her legs wobble and her chair did look inviting. Instead, she remained standing. With a insolent tilt of her chin, she reached to the computer monitor, scooped up Bic and set the little animal on her shoulder. "What's going on?"

"Sit down, Darcy, please," said Fury, shooting Loki and the rest a look that carried a faint plea that didn't belong on the unflappable Director's face. There was nothing threatening in Fury's attitude, which was what made it so unnerving. Thor stood, his powerful frame tense with the readiness of a warrior. Loki, however, didn't move from his chair, cold calculation, but no real menace, in his eyes.

"No," said Darcy, the word tasting more like bitter defiance against whatever Fury would say next rather than a response to his request that she sit.

The heavy black leather could not hide the slight defeated slump of the Director's shoulders. He studied Darcy, clearly hoping she'd do as she was told, the eye patch somehow feeling like a whole eye, as piercing as his remaining eye.

Then he spoke and she flinched and wobbled backward as if she'd been punched in the face. Just three words, noun, verb and adjective. On the desk, the faint buzz and rumble of music still emanated from the earbuds. A glance told her that Loki wore a genuinely surprised and not entirely convinced expression on his face. Hands touched her shoulder and then Jane put an arm around her.

Just three words.

"Sean is dead."

## Chapter 28

### CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

*Somewhere else.*

*Not here.*

*I'm somewhere else.*

Detached, Darcy stood in the Fish Bowl, observing her surroundings with cold, clinical, clarity. It was like the negative energy Jane had described earlier had found an emptiness inside her, a vacuum, and bounced off the theoretical mirror, focusing and making a worm hole where all her emotions escaped, leaving a shell-Darcy.

She'd been here before, in this nowhere-place, years ago, when she had walked with the slow care of the wounded down a dorm hallway, soundless except for a quiet snuffle of her bloodied nose, numb to even the ache of bruises on her face and beyond.

But this was different, wasn't it? There had been no violation...

She thought of the dream and the sedation of her shock almost failed, as the ugly bite of guilt simmered in her belly. Sinking again into comfortable numbness, she watched as Loki and Thor questioned Fury: Loki, with a disinterested tone -- as if he were wondering if Fury's coat was deer or calfskin -- asking if there had been a body and if it had been identified. It was so like Loki not to bother mixing the ugly business of murder with pesky emotions.

Just like what she was doing now.

"Darcy?" Pressure grew around her shoulders as Jane tightened her hug. The gesture carried no comfort, and in fact, made something inside her recoil and struggle, feeling trapped.

In the lonely hours of early morning, the killer had thrust inside her dreams, into her head and learned that Sean O'Malley had been compromised, that her friend was no longer a useful tool and could be disposed of accordingly.

And the day before that, she had known that her nightmare was made of more than random garbage from her subconscious, but she'd kept the dream from Loki to protect herself, for fear that he'd reject her for her insecurities.

*I thought you didn't give a shit what other people thought?* a voice inside her said. *I thought you were brave.*

Her gaze rove dispassionately over the raven-haired demigod who was her lover. *I care what he thinks, and I got Sean killed.*

The three men continued discussing the morbid details of her friend's death and she listened, hearing nothing, being utterly nothing. "Darcy!" said Jane louder, shaking her shoulders gently.

Getting no response from Darcy, Jane said to the rest, "Do we have to discuss this *now*?" Darcy could feel the slight shift of Jane's weight as she not-so-subtly nodded her head in Darcy's direction. *I'm not fragile*, she protested silently. *I'm stone, unbreakable.*

"Be gone," said Loki imperiously to Fury, and for once the Director didn't bother with the usual testosterone-fueled pissing match. The chime sang quietly as he left, leaving the scent of factory-tanned leather and she wondered if from that day on, she'd always associate the smell with death.

"Darcy?" repeated Jane. Darcy turned her head and met Jane's eyes, the muscles in her neck responding as if they weren't entirely hers. "We're going home."

"Why?" said Darcy.

"Because..." Anguish twisted Jane's pretty face and she slid a glance at Thor and Loki.

"I'm fine," Darcy said, and she wriggled free of Jane's arm with an incongruous grace that struck her as almost funny. Under the blankness, a lunatic jag of laughter bubbled and then subsided.

"You are not fine," said Loki, who had somehow moved to stand before her, one hand on her shoulder. On her other, Bic's claws prickled as the lizard clung to her blouse.

"What do you know?" she grumbled, shrugging off his hand and retreating a step. "You don't know me." He cocked his head, assessing her and his cool appraisal unfroze one emotion -- anger.

"This is all your fault," she said to him and white hot fury, thick and steaming, hissed past frigid numbness and flooded her frozen limbs. "Your fault." Still more outside herself than in, she saw her arms lift, palms landing on his chest. Arms braced straight, she shoved him, pushing anger through the heels of her hands.

"Darcy," said Jane.

"You did this," she advanced slightly and shoved again, though, obviously, her pitiful strength didn't move him. With another step, she made a deliberate fist and brought it with slow force against his chest. She followed with the opposite hand, this time hitting harder. "You and your stupid purposes, immortal bullshit that you couldn't keep in Asgard, you had to scheme and manipulate and kill until there was nothing, nothing..." Her hands moved faster and through her tears of impotent rage, all she saw was a hazy vision of pale fists hitting black leather. Dimly, she heard Jane say her name again, no doubt aware that beating on an unstable, arrogant immortal was several shades crazier than swimming with piranhas with a scrape on your knee.

Lost in a cathartic rhythm, Darcy's fists kept moving, a small part of her even relishing the dangerous nature of what she did, self-destructive and daring him to respond in kind.

Loki's vow not to hurt her held, and he tolerated the wordless ranting of her fists in silence until, just as her arms had begun to ache and knuckles throbbed, he grabbed her wrists and stopped her. "Home," he said, not to her, but to Jane and Thor.

Still fueled by pointless anger, she yanked her arms out of his grasp, welcoming the sharp burn of her flesh wrenching in his powerful hands. But he anticipated her move and let go too quickly and she stumbled back.

With a sorrowful look at Darcy, Jane nodded and began to gather up her belongings. Darcy watched as she collected a rough stack of papers from her desk and shoved them in her leather bag along with the iPad. Thor switched off the coffee maker and then bent to whisper something in Jane's ear, his hand rubbing her back. The gesture wrung a tight longing inside Darcy. She ached for human contact, but what right did she have asking for comfort when Sean's death was carved into her conscience?

"Ready?" said Jane uncertainly. Thor stood at Jane's side, a bit of pale gray on the red flannel of his



shoulder, which Darcy realized was Bic. The lizard, startled by her violence, had beat a hasty retreat. For some reason Bic's abandonment ate at her anger, exposing sorrow. She bit her lower lip, forcing down tears.

Knowing that if she didn't move, Loki would put his hands on her, and unable to bear anyone's touch, she collected her things and led the way out of the Fish Bowl.

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Her anger fled as soon as she stepped into the elevator, surrounded by the concern of her friends and still isolated by her self-loathing. Fury, anticipating their leaving, had already sent down the glowering guard escort and Darcy took a peculiar comfort in their antagonistic presence.

On the ride up the elevator and as she passed through the scanners on the first floor, cool detachment again sealed in her emotions. She stepped through the doorway, and her eyes swept the landscape, over the hulking shapes of sad cattle in the corrals and the crystal blue sky beyond. To the northwest, thick, globular thunderheads grew like giant cauliflower, and the air felt stuffy and thick with pressure.

She stopped before the SUV's front passenger door, hand on the handle waiting for the click of the lock. No one questioned her change to the seating arrangement. In fact, suffocating silence, the kind of quiet that Darcy normally would have been compelled to break with chatter, filled the vehicle all the way home.

Her new armor worked so well it nearly broke her heart, with Jane and even Loki unwilling to broach the strong, invisible walls. When she entered the house, the familiar smell of the place, that distinctive aromatic mélange of food, people, pets, and every other substance in the building that each home developed over time, picked at her defenses, and tears bloomed in her eyes. She came to a stop a few steps inside, remembering the time she brought Sean by the house.

"Darcy?" said Jane, cautiously.

"Fine," she said mechanically and continued toward the safety of her room, away from the risk of anyone's comfort, she hoped.

Entering the room, she pulled the door closed behind her and then sat on her bed and yanked off her boots, letting each *thunk* on the carpet, but taking no pleasure in the sound. A moment later, a light knock sounded on the door, and then the latch clicked as it was opened.

Darcy stared at the boots on floor, the haphazard way they lay on the tan carpet, and spared Jane a sideways glance. Inside her, a complicated tangle of emotions vied for power. She felt the pull of friendship and yet, a dull resentment at Jane's presence when all she want - no, all she deserved -- was to be alone.

"I don't know what to say," began Jane, "because, I know, um, what you are feeling. When my parents died..."

Darcy didn't hear the rest, her own thoughts drowning out Jane's voice. *No you don't, because you didn't kill your parents.*

"...but nothing I say will make it any better."

Darcy continued to study the floor, certain that if she spoke, no good would come of it.

"I feel like I should apologize."

Darcy tilted a bleary-eyed look up at Jane.

"I know I have no control over any other this, I can't possibly be to blame, but I still feel like I dragged you into this. If I hadn't--"

"--been so determined to drive out into the desert that night," Darcy finished for her, "your future boyfriend wouldn't have dropped out of the sky and brought an Asgard-load of crazy into my life." She gestured around the room, unable to stop the flow of horrible words from her mouth. "I wouldn't be stuck here, in the butt-hole of New Mexico; Thor and Loki would be somewhere else, and Sean would be alive."

Jane's posture slumped and hurt bled from her big brown eyes. To the real Darcy, the one who wasn't torn apart by grief and guilt, her friend's pain cut a ragged wound in her heart, but that Darcy wasn't in control. This Darcy suddenly raged like a great beast, blinded and maddened, and looking for relief in the pain of others.

But for a second the kinder Darcy took over, just long enough to look down at her own feet before the crueler Darcy said, "You got me into this mess. Me and Erik, both."

The silence cut between them like a scalpel. Then Jane said, in a small voice, "I'm so sorry."

When Darcy look up again, Jane was gone.

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And she cried, though not as much as she would have expected, and not as heartily as she had a few weeks past, when she had sobbed in the absurd relief of Loki's arms. Maybe because she didn't really think she deserved the normalcy of tears.

Face half buried in her pillow, she muffled the sound, afraid the noise might bring back Jane or worse yet, Loki, and simultaneously wishing it would. Because what she needed more than anything in the world was her enigmatic and sometimes insane immortal. But if there was one thing Darcy was good at, it was building solid defenses, and her thick force field of indifference kept her roommates at bay.

After a while, even though the midday sun cooked the trailer home's metal siding and the cooler labored noisily, she fell asleep, exhausted by too many nights spent doing everything but sleeping and the emotional toll of the day.

She awoke disoriented, feeling a vague *deja vu* as the high-pitched yipping of coyotes opened the silence of the desert night. Seconds later, the animals' calls were underscored by the rumble of distant thunder. Eyes crusty from crying, she squinted through the dark at the clock radio: 10:30 PM

Brass, copper and steel catching the dim moonlight, the stick insect perched on the lampshade, antennae twitching, but there was no Bic on the nightstand, belly-up and snoozing. Her pet's absence stung. *Just a stupid lizard*, she thought and then shook her head, negating that thought. Take someone for granted -- a friend, a pet -and regret it when they're gone.

*Friend*. She wheezed, her diaphragm cramping painfully at the memory of Jane's face crumbling as she lashed out with cruel words. Sitting up, Darcy buried her face in her hands, shoulders hitching with dry sobs.

What had possessed her to say those things? *Jane's just as caught up in this cluster fuck as me*. Like Loki had said, there were a million different possible paths in life, and many of them still

could have led to a reality where Darcy, Jane and Erik met Thor and Loki. And the two brothers' family drama would have played itself out in Puente Antiguo and beyond with or without Jane and Darcy's involvement.

Outside, the coyotes' noise escalated to a horrible wailing and Darcy bit her lip, hoping that Inkblot was hidden safely in Loki's lair. Fearing she'd see the skinny canines hunkered around the cat's carcass, she rose, put on her glasses and peered out the window anyway. A slash of lightning carved a narrow, bright chasm in the sky over Puente Antiguo. The flash revealed two coyotes, who slunk across the property and east. Neither carried a black cat in its mouth. Thunder chased the lightning and Darcy watched as the storm approached from the north, the faint smell of wet sagebrush coming in through the swamp cooler's vent.

She sat back on the bed, now very much awake. Her eyes wandered to where Bic usually slept and then up the vase that held the Asgard rose. It took a second before the anomaly registered in her brain. The rose, which had shrunk to a sad, four-petaled version of itself, was now whole and shimmering in the moonlight.

When...? Distracted by other things, nightmares and sexy supervillains, she hadn't looked closely at it that morning, and later, in her shock, well, a gargoyle in a pink tutu could have been dancing on the nightstand and she wouldn't have noticed.

She touched the tip of her index finger to a petal and felt cinnamon-tinged magic. Recent magic. He'd come into her room, but hadn't stayed. Did he think she hated him? Did he hate her?

*He let you whack him like a piñata. Anybody else, he would've gone all, "You dare touch me!" and turned them inside out.* Whatever he felt for her, even she could concede, it wasn't hate.

And like Jane, he hadn't deserved to be a target for her pain. *I told him I was strong.* She cringed at the idea, wondering how he could ever think she was smart, when she so obviously didn't know the definition of the word "strong."

Her legs tingling with the need to move, she got up, shoved her feet in her running shoes, not bothering with the laces and crept out of her room. Loki's room was dark, but Jane's door lined in light, the quiet murmur of her voice and Thor's the only sounds in the house.

Careful not to trip on her shoelaces, Darcy snuck down the hall, doing a bad job of it and managing to find every creaky spot in the floorboards. The front door's hinges groaned annoyingly loud, but Darcy forged on and out to Loki's lair.

To her relief, Inkblot was there, and not in a coyote's belly. The black cat sat on the top of a seatback, four rows from the entrance. He watched Darcy warily, but didn't move when she took a seat toward the front. She closed her eyes and listened to the chirp - and occasional bark - of the crickets. More lightning flashed through her eyelids and thunder's gentle rumble took on a harsher electrical crackle. Moist air, a rarity in the desert, brushed over her skin, pushed by a downdraft from the coming rainstorm. The leaves of the nearby cottonwood tree hissed like voices in the growing wind.

"You should not be out here, alone."

With a yip that sounded a lot like one of Loki's crickets, Darcy startled, sitting bolt upright in the seat. "Dude. You so need to stop sneaking up on me."

Loki stood in the doorway, dressed in black and deepest green, but no leather. With his face turned toward her and darkness, she couldn't quite see his features, but sensed that he was looking at the

feline perched a few feet behind her. "And you," he replied, "need to learn to be more aware of your surroundings."

She started to protest that other than Loki, most people wouldn't use magic to be sneaky, but then remembered that the killer could do magic. A dark cloud of self loathing began to grow in her heart and she wondered if she might truly be too stupid to live.

"Back in the house," Loki said, in the tone of a lord to his disobedient servant.

Even though she knew he was right -- she needed to return to the safety of the house -- her rebellious nature made her say, "No."

"That was not a request. You are going back in the house."

"You can't make me," she said, even though it was stupid and petulant.

"Oh, but I can." He didn't move a muscle, but his intent surrounded her, magnified by lightning that lanced across the black sky behind him. "And I will."

"I'll hate you forever."

"I live off hate."

"No, you don't," she replied. "You only think you do, but all that hate is killing you."

"Nonsense, I'm immortal."

"Right. So now denial is also a river in Asgard." She cocked her head, taking in his slim silhouette, backlit by the lightning storm. "You won't get cancer or heart disease, but all that hate is tearing you apart, fucking up your magic."

He straightened, hands at his side in fists. "No! Odin and--" Scalding scorn poured from him, but he fell abruptly silent. He gave her that same look from this morning, wary, as if she were a dangerous puzzle.

"You are correct in one respect. I'm not human and will never be."

"Oh, look, it's Star Wars' newest villain, Darth Obvious."

"The boy," he said, disregarding her snark, "the one who force himself on you, years ago. If I should ever find him, he will pay for what was done."

Darcy had to admit that the idea sent a frisson of vengeful excitement up her spine. "No. I don't want you to do that."

"Precisely." In two strides, he stood over her. "But I will do it nonetheless, just as I will take you back into the house if you will not come willingly. Because I am Loki of Asgard. It is what I am."

"So you'll force me to do something I don't want to do. That doesn't make you much better than the rapist."

"You are correct," he stated bluntly. "My actions are grounded in the fallacy that I do what is best for you, but in the end, the outcome is no different. I have taken your choice."

"And I'll fight you every step of the way, because I'm Darcy Lewis of Midgard." She found the button on the armrest, and leaned the chair back into the recline position.

"Sean isn't dead because you're immortal," she said, changing the subject. "He's gone because some asshole is caught up in an eons-old grudge against you. And-and, that's your fault, but it totally isn't your fault." She started to say the next words, although she wasn't sure she meant them. "I'm sor--"

"Do not apologize," Loki said. He crouched at her side, balanced, catlike, on the balls of his feet. His head slightly bowed, his posture felt vaguely subservient. Darcy clenched her hand in a tight fist, fighting the urge to touch him and remembered a few weeks past, when he had sat her on her bed and untied her shoelaces; remembered the dizzying shock of Loki being anything but cruel; knew they were taking baby steps toward this thing called Loki and Darcy.

"I'm sorry," she insisted, because he still wasn't the boss of her.

He lifted his face, a funny kind of surprise in his eyes, like he couldn't believe she'd spoken. "Do not apologize. Not to me, least of all to me." More lightning revealed fleeting emotion that aged his youthful features, gone fast, but not so quickly that she didn't recognize it. Self-loathing; the same emotion that currently tore at her.

"Too late," she said, with false cheer. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." He cast her a weary frown. "Why'd you let me hit you?"

A bit of his fey charm shining in the dark, he smirked and said, "Because you are 'adorable.'"

"No, that's why your magic works better when I'm around."

He shook his head and stood. "The house, Darcy."

Resigned, she put the seat in its upright position, but didn't move. "I said some horrible stuff to Jane. I wonder if she'll ever forgive me."

"Ever, it would seem, is now," said Loki. She blinked up at him through a blinding mix of lightning and dark, and he explained himself. "Jane heard you leave the house and came to my door, demanding that I fetch you back."

"You're Jane's errand boy?"

"No," he said snappishly, "I was about to come collect you when she rapped on my door."

Darcy sighed. "Even Jane heard me sneak out?"

"An elephant would manage stealth better," he said. "Another lesson I will have to teach you."

Grief still ruled her heart, but Darcy liked the sound of that. A tiny smile twitched the corner of her mouth just as Loki held his hand to her.

"Tyranny is a flavor I enjoy, but don't make me impose it on you, Darcy. Don't make me destroy what there is between us."

She'd made her point and it was time to stop acting like a child. Taking his hand, she stood, took a step and tripped over a shoelace, face-planting on his chest. Pale blue light, Loki had conjured a globe of light, fell on the floor, revealing her untied laces.

Loki eyed the laces and then her. "You are a tiny disaster." Something in his voice made her breath hitch, and the globe's light broke in the prism of moisture in her eyes.

He took her other hand and pulled both behind him, snugging her against him. His arms went around her shoulders, and she protested weakly, "I don't need this...strong."

"Of course not," he said, mockingly. "But I do."

His words, though totally sardonic, flattened the remains of the emotional wall inside her, even though she didn't think she deserved comfort, not even from a guy who thought the Earth had a bad case of mortals and he was the cure. His waist was solid and warm beneath the grasp of her arms, and her fingers clenched the twin bands of muscle that ran down his back. Surrendering to what she had craved so badly, she leaned into his tall frame, face pressed so hard against his torso that her glasses dug into the side of her face.

She clenched her eyelids shut, determined not to cry, but tears oozed determinedly out and down her cheeks. "Sick of crying," she muttered and outside nature responded with a brilliant fork of lightning and an instantaneous crack of thunder. She flinched at the sound and hung on tighter to Loki, hoping that having a thunder god in residence would prevent lightning from actually striking the house or Loki's lair.

One lone raindrop smacked noisily on the roof of the airplane cabin. There was pause, then a second landed, and then, as if the first two were wet scouts for the storm, hundreds more followed, pounding an almost deafening rhythm on the structure's outer walls. Out of the reach of the raindrops, but still close to the entrance, Darcy felt the cold spray of mist pushed by the wind.

Loki pulled her a little farther into the cabin's confines. "It isn't your fault."

She didn't have to ask what he meant. "Of course it is."

"No," he pushed her back, and then took her face in his hands, making her meet his eyes. "You forget yourself, girl." His thumbs scrubbed lightly under her eyes and vanity tweaked her as she remembered that her mascara was doing the goth-girl-gone-emo trick. "You withheld the return of the nightmare -- a mistake, indeed -- but do not think for one moment that you are my equal in the game."

"The killer used me--"

"Of course he did." He lowered his face slightly toward hers "Do you not find it odd that Sean's interest in you coincided with the arrival of Thor and I?"

"He, I..." The truth in his words was cruel, as hurtful as the stuff she lobbed at Jane earlier, but his hands on her face still gentle.

"I assumed our adversary reached directly into your dreamspace, when, in actuality, he used your friendship with Sean as a bridge past my defenses." His fingertips curled, exerting a faint sharp pressure along the bottom of her jaw line, and unconsciously, she rose on her toes. "Make no mistake," a slight cruelty hardened the line of his mouth, "Once I recognized my error, I was in control of the game."

"You mean you..." She squirmed a little in his grasp. "You let Sean die?"

He didn't bat an eye at the accusation. Instead he spoke a few opaque words. "The rose, Darcy Lewis of Midgard. Not mine, but the false one."

He was doing it again. Expecting her to work it out on her own. In her chest, she felt a tightness, the fluttery panic that she was too stupid, too much what she projected to the world, to figure it out. She would fail this test and he'd leave her, not by dying, but simply walking away.

Settling back on her heels, she concentrated on breathing, in and out, recalling the two times she had seen and touched the copy of Frigga's rose. Fury's smug expression as he set the flower on the table was the first image that came to her mind. Then the foreign taste-touch of magic on her skin, so different from Loki's. Next came her own little Schadenfreude when she told Fury that the rose was too perfect to be an Asgard rose. *Too perfect, because it was a fake.*

So?

The connection between the rose and Sean eluded her and tension grew along her shoulders. Loosening her hold on Loki, she set her hands on his hips, feeling the blunt end of hipbones beneath. What did he want her to see? What was the point of this? Frantic, her mind went back to the possibility that Loki had known the murderer would kill Sean once he realized his tool was compromised.

A counterfeit rose. Sean dead.

She stared up at Loki, his features blurred by the condensation that started to fog her glasses, and she remembered a haughty sneer on that face when she compared his magic to the killer's. *"A cut flower is a dying thing. Dead flesh is easily manipulated as it no longer has to carry on with the business of living. It can easily take on any form, any modification that would break the living form."*

"Dead flesh," she said aloud. Triumph at putting together the puzzle joined with a faint hope. "The body SHIELD found. It was a fake. Okay, not fake," she grimaced, "probably uh, the missing guy, Peter Edwards, his corpse. Sean's alive...somewhere."

If she was expecting congratulations or praise, it wasn't happening. Loki nodded. "He is still lost to you."

"But we can--"

"No, we cannot. There is no friend to save, Darcy, because there was never any amity between you, just a lie."

She shook her head. "He is controlled--"

"He is a willing partner." Darcy shook her head, but Loki spoke over her protest, his resonant voice matching the ferocious beat of rain on metal. "A scant two weeks after I confronted Thor on Puente Antiguo's streets, Sean's predecessor, Miles Collins, Assistant Comptroller, resigned his position, citing sudden health concerns. There were eight qualified candidates for the position, including one Sean O'Malley, although several had years more experience than O'Malley. History tells us that O'Malley was given the position."

"Coincidence," said Darcy.

"Coincidence is an inevitability in all narratives, but when so overused, it becomes suspect," observed Loki, continuing, "At the time, SHIELD's primary administrative functions were housed in a nondescript building, in an even more nondescript commercial sector of Oakland, California. There had been talk of moving the offices to one of SHIELD's more secure, underground facilities, but the idea was abandoned when that location imploded -- unexpectedly." He smirked; Darcy glowered at him.

Obviously enjoying her ire, he went on: "'Better,' said the powers-that-be, 'to leave the running of SHIELD in the ugly, unassuming building.'"

A lightning strike lit up the interior of Loki's lair and Darcy jumped, hands tightening on his hips. Loki shifted his hands to her shoulders and said, off-topic, "You've heard the term, 'Faraday cage?'"

Confused, she shook her head and then nodded. "Yeah, I've read a science book. Your lair is like a Faraday cage, right?" Meaning the cabin's metal walls protected them from lightning.

He nodded and returned to the subject of Sean. "Then, just around the time that plans were being made to give Dr. Jane Foster her own lab in SHIELD's newest facility in the New Mexico desert, once again, the idea of moving the administrative offices developed momentum. Assistant Comptroller Sean O'Malley presented compelling evidence for how the relocation would save SHIELD tremendous operating expenses. Internal documents reveal that O'Malley's superiors initially disagreed strenuously with the plan, but then, abruptly, they became its biggest supporter."

"Sean doesn't like big cities," said Darcy. "The California coast is one big stripe of city-burb. He probably wanted the hell out."

"And in his quest for a pastoral lifestyle," Loki said, "he positioned himself in the ideal locale for the return of Thor and the unwilling Loki."

"Yeah, totally gives new meaning to the phrase, 'There goes the neighborhood.'" She pushed her glasses up onto her head, since fogged-up, they weren't doing much good. "Just because you always have schemes, doesn't mean everybody else does."

"You're being churlish because you know I'm right," he replied. "Sean O'Malley has been an active player in this game for far longer than a few months. Much too long for a simple pawn." He tapped a finger between her eyebrows. "Scowling at me doesn't alter the facts. It simply hastens the point where your vanity demands Botox."

"Needles in my forehead? Pass." Then again, she was dating an immortal. Who knew what she'd do to get him to stick around? "So the killer has been hanging around for years, setting up scenarios, and-and people," *like Sean*, "just in case you dropped by Midgard?"

"Decades, perhaps. Centuries."

The harsh reality that Sean had used and betrayed her sawed at her insides, so she fell back on feeble humor. "Wow. Do you know how to make friends and influence people or what?"

"I'm not without talents."

"Why did the killer fake-murder Sean?"

"O'Malley's role at SHIELD had played itself out, and death offers a measure of freedom. The dead are the least likely suspects in any crime."

"You mean the murderer will send Sean out to do...bad stuff?" She could hear the disbelief in her voice, because, even now, they were talking about Sean, her friend.

"Possibly." He cupped her chin, looking deep into her eyes. "It was not your dream that alerted Sean and his master to our plans. I did not disable all the listening devices last night."

"You wanted him to know your plans," she said.

"Whether partner or pawn, the boy's master would not want us to meet. If I'd been mistaken -- unlikely -- O'Malley would have been at work as usual; he would have listened to the spelled song and followed you down to the laboratory as meekly as--."



"--Thor follows Jane?" finished Darcy, helpfully. He smiled, fingers toying with the lowlights in her hair.

She watched the lightning scatter shadows over his face and considered what he had said. "Your plan was to force the murderer to give up his mole in SHIELD. How do you know this plan won't backfire?" She smiled grimly and swiped a hand over his cheek. "Chunks of your last two big plans are still on your face."

His eyes narrowed and he stared up at the lair's ceiling, as if searching for something.

"What?" said Darcy.

"I'm trying to remember why I tolerate your insolence."

"Sexiest thighs in the nine realms. Also, I tased Thor. Zap!"

"Ah, that would be it."

Hands back on his hips, she let her attention fall to the patterns of dark and lighter green cloth on his chest, noting that even without leather and metal, everything he wore had a very Loki flair.

"Sean made me feel smart, too," she said. "He made me feel like I was special, one of the few people at SHIELD that he really wanted to hang with."

Lifting her chin, she asked, "Are you going to betray me, Loki?"

He met her gaze levelly. "Everyone knows I'm not to be trusted."

"I'm not everyone," she replied coolly. "Or am I? You said you'd protect me, you said--"

At once his hands were back on her jaw line, lifting her face to within inches of his. Outside the rain slowed, but the lightning grew more frenetic, flinging unearthly light across the perfect inhumanity of his face. "Do you truly wish me to enumerate the things that I might do for you. *Do you?*"

She swayed, unsteady even with her hands on his hips, trying to understand his words. They were heavy with threat and promise; they terrified her and filled her with hope. They blasted her with the accumulated frustration and anger of centuries and were tainted with despair. They left her wanting to pull away and run.

Instead, she stood firm and said, "I want to know that I can trust the most untrustworthy person in my life." She was pleased to see his improbably beautiful face waver, taken aback by her demand, perhaps even a little confused.

Then he said, his expression now incredulous, "You want me to be trustworthy?"

"Uh, yeah. Trustworthy. You don't have to marry it. Just, like, buy it, but leave the tags on. Wear it for a few years, decades. If it doesn't work out, return for a full refund."

The spicy touch of magic bled into her skin. "You would ask this of me?" Loki's voice was quiet, but possessed a timbre that vibrated in her bones. A desolate anger took over his face. Darcy gulped but nodded resolutely.

More power, so much that it made her eyes burn, rushed from him. "I can scarce trust myself. My memories, knowledge and...magic are but ash." He broke eye contact. "As is my interest in any matter. I am naught but an empty shell." When his gaze slid back to her, it was filled with cunning.

"Except when you are about. I ask again, why is that?"

Even though she assumed the question was rhetorical--because how the hell would she know?--she lifted her shoulders in an exaggerated shrug.

Her face still in his hands, he leaned back, appraising her. "Without you," he said, "this personage who haunts my steps would get none of my attention. It is only because of you, that I find him worthy of notice. With you, I feel the return of purpose." His shoulders slumped and he bent, his forehead against hers. "You already have too much of me. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she answered. His words were an evasion of her original question, but also a huge admission. A fair trade, she decided. "Wh--?"

"No more questions." He turned toward the cabin's opening, where the lightning still periodically splashed on metal, but the thunder had subsided to a dull rumble and the rain eased to a faint mist. "In the house. To bed." She gave him a weary look, because as much as he usually turned her on, her libido had left the building.

He rolled his eyes. "There's no sport in bedding a grieving, overwrought woman who can't even tie her own shoelaces."

"I'm not overwrought," she grumbled as he scooped her up and took her back to the house. In her room, she allowed herself one last secret insecurity.

"You want the shirt off my back?" They stood before her bed, Darcy with her hands fisted in the garment in question, Loki's eyes wide with feigned confusion.

"Yes. I want it. For always." The shirt, with its complex pattern of differing shades of green, stitched in a way that gave the light fabric the appearance of being thicker, was so quintessentially Loki that she knew she must have it, a memento of the days, weeks, or months that she'd been the God of Mischief's lover.

She pulled the shirt over her head to wear as pajamas, knowing it would be the last time she wore it, and from here on, it would hang safely in her closet. From now on, she couldn't give in to her anxieties that Loki would leave. Sean was probably still alive, but she still felt, deep down, that her fears could have cost him his life.

In bed, Loki pulled her against him and she hunched her shoulders slightly, so that the shirt's fabric bunched and the smell of him surrounded her. On the nightstand, something moved--Bic finally returning to her snoozing spot -- and Darcy smiled. He was wrong, of course. She didn't have too much of him, but for now, she had enough.

## Chapter 29

### CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Thor awoke to the almost instinctive awareness that Loki was having another nightmare. Moving with muscles conditioned by the habit of his brother's nightly torments, and his brain still groggy with sleep, he did not realize the problem with the scenario until he found Loki's door open, the room empty.

Standing in the pitch black hallway, he stared at Darcy's closed door, listening to the slight squeak of shifting floorboards as someone paced within the room. He pondered the odd sense of alarm that had taken him from Jane's bed. A few days ago, Loki had admitted that in Darcy's presence, he suffered no dark dreams. So why the strange feeling that something was amiss?

Had Thor been dealing with any other personage, he might have shrugged and returned to bed, but this was Loki. He stepped up to the door and almost let himself in when he remembered that while his brother was within, it was nonetheless Darcy's room. "Loki," he said, and knocked.

It came as no small surprise, when after a short pause, his brother's voice said, "Come."

Thor turned the door handle, careful as always not to twist the knob too hard, lest the feeble mortal construction fail under his grasp. Careful had become a habit for the most part, and he wondered, when the day came that he returned to Asgard, if he'd find himself fumbling and too gentle with his home world's furnishings.

Loki stood to the left, near the closet, but out of the faint light from the window, tall and wraithlike in the small room. Thor glanced around the space, his eyes lighting on a pale shape on the nightstand. Darcy's little pet, unmoving, white belly skyward and tail hanging lifelessly off the furniture's edge. A sharp foreboding prickled his nerves. "Dead?" he muttered, his gaze going to the girl who lay in a limp sprawl on her back. "Loki, what have you done?"

Loki, who watched him with familiar contempt, followed Thor's gaze, his expression turning to even more familiar mockery. "Ah, you think that I, vexed by the woman's attack on my person, slew dragon *and* fair maiden." With a pointed look at the door and toward Jane's room, he said, "Does Jane know the dark places your mind goes?"

At that very moment, said tiny dragon's feet flailed in a running dream, tail lashing like a dying snake. Thor, feeling foolish, frowned at his sibling. "You have hardly exercised care with mortals in the past, brother."

"I am bored," said Loki, "but killing a foolish young woman, who trusts me entirely too much, is hardly a diversion." He canted his head to the left, weary derision on his lean face. "And is there *anything* that I might do, that will break you of the habit of calling me 'brother?'"

Killing either Darcy or Jane came to mind, but Thor decided for once, to err on the side of silence. He let his gaze drop to the sleeping girl on the bed, in part because he knew that the action might annoy Loki. She had kicked most of the bedclothes off, with only the lower half of her left leg tangled in the sheet. Her nightclothes, Thor realized, consisted of one of Loki's shirts, and a pair of red panties. Though only a few years younger than Jane, she seemed too much a child to be a bedmate, but his eyes nevertheless traveled over her sleeping form, to her admirable breasts and the broad cradle made by her hips and thighs, a place where a man could take happy shelter for hours. In his head, Thor grinned. Perhaps not such a child after all.

"Enough!"

Thor looked up in time to see Loki approaching him, chin low, murder in his eyes, violence in his skinny frame. Thor braced and met his brother head on, only to find himself slightly overbalanced with no one before him.

Laughter echoed softly off the walls and ceiling. "That never loses its charm," said Loki, now leaning against a dresser on the right side of the room.

"I see you are rediscovering your ability for projections," observed Thor, wondering if he was speaking to the real Loki.

"As the mortals say, 'How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, practice, practice.'" Loki glanced down at his young companion and then eyed Thor. "Is there a reason the Mighty Thor is creeping into bedchambers to leer at mortals?"

Thor scowled. "I knocked." The one time he actually entered a room politely and still he got no credit. "I had the odd sense that you were haunted by another nightmare."

To Thor's surprise, rather than sneering, Loki straightened, cunning interest glittering in his eyes. "You sensed? Explain yourself."

"It came to me as it always has, a stirring in the back of my mind." Thor studied the man who hung so comfortably in the shadows. Was he real or just a projection? It maddened Thor that after all these long centuries, he still couldn't see through Loki's illusions. "This time, however, I find you awake and untroubled." He remembered the sound of pacing and amended, "Well, perhaps not untroubled."

"What reason do I have to be troubled? I'm King of Asgard and now rule Midgard...oh, wait," said Loki with bitter mirth. He started toward Thor, making a shooing motion toward the door. "Let us speak elsewhere. Your voice would wake the dead."

Thor started to respond, but Loki had vanished. Motion caught Thor's eye, drawing his gaze to the bed where Loki paused to unravel tangled bedding and pull it over Darcy. Though it may have been a trick of the shadows, for an brief moment, Loki's face was transformed, molded by an expression that Thor could not ever recall seeing on his sibling's face.

Like any of the nobles, Loki had his fair share of assignations, but beyond a few instances of youthful infatuation, Thor could not remember his brother ever being demonstrably in love. Though more than willing to apply his sly charm to the art of flirting, Loki kept any sincere affections, if he ever held any, to himself.

Thor turned and made for the living room, ruefully acknowledging that he'd had a part in schooling Loki to guard his emotions and wrap everything he did in insincerity. Was that what Loki did now? Did he play at fondness for Jane's assistant? And if so, to what end?

Thor had mulled the question over in his mind before, examining it as he might have studied a sword's edge, lifting it from the whet stone, testing the angle. Time and time again, he had insisted to Jane that Darcy offered Loki no strategic advantage. Darcy had no skill in combat; despite her vocation, she knew nothing of science; and though purportedly schooled in politics, she had a habit of speaking in manner that was anything but diplomatic.

Of course, that was precisely the sort of thing that Loki would expect him to believe. Was there anything Loki did that did not play into some greater, overarching plan? What possible service

could a young mortal with no useful skills or associations be to Loki? Was it too much to hope that just this once, Loki's motives were grounded in no more than a desire for companionship?

Behind him, Darcy's door shut with a quiet click, Loki's footfalls following, the noise an artifice, since Thor knew that even now, his brother could move soundlessly. The soft pattern of footfalls drove home a fundamental truth to Thor. No matter how much he defended Loki to Director Fury and others, he knew that his brother could not truly be trusted.

As the lumpish shapes of Midgardian furniture loomed out of the living room darkness, Thor hoped he had not made a mistake in tolerating Loki's association with Darcy, hoped he had not thrown the poor girl to a not-so metaphorical wolf.

With Loki just a pace behind him now, however, Thor could not help but remember happier times, when he knew Loki "had his back" as the mortals said. Just then the living room was flooded with light, as Loki magically flipped the switch. Thor briefly took in the common area, including the kitchen counter, where a wooden block bristled with small knives. Heading for the seats in the living room, he sighed, knowing that these days, Loki saw his back as a convenient place to drive a knife.

Sitting in his customary place on the love seat, he looked expectantly up at Loki who remained standing. With a perfunctory wave of his hand, Loki disabled the listening devices and then asked, "Were you dreaming, before you had this sense that I was troubled?"

"No," said Thor.

"Are you certain?" He spoke slowly as if Thor were a child.

"Yes," responded Thor, annoyed by Loki's tone. As he spoke, however, a thought tickled his brain like a flea in the ear. "No..."

Thor drifted into silent thought and Loki prodded, "Oh, great and noble Prince Thor, I beseech thee, share the inner workings of your mind. It should take but a second of your time."

"Sometimes," said Thor, "I long for the days when you so ably hid your contempt for me." And yet he also found an odd comfort in this unpleasant version of his brother, because quite possibly, for once he was dealing with a sincere Loki.

"I've tried to kill you twice, quite recently," observed Loki, a little too cheerfully. "Comity on my part would be more suspect than scorn."

Thor nodded in grudging agreement and answered Loki's previous question. "There may have been something, a fragment of a dream." He rubbed his chin, thinking. "Screams, Jane's." Turning his head, he fixed his eyes on the home's main entrance, a dull sense of alarm giving him a reflexive urge to summon Mjölnir. "Something that transpired on the front porch, a woman's face, contorted and frozen in death, then Jane's." His hand moved up to rub his eyes. "That is all I recall."

"It bears similarities to Darcy's nightmare."

"But Jane..." Alarm built like storm clouds in Thor's mind. "This villain thinks Darcy is beyond his reach, so he now turns his attention to Jane."

Loki shrugged, his gesture accentuating what he said next. "Jane's safety is no concern of mine and thus she is a poor weapon to use against me."

"She is Darcy's friend." He pummeled Loki with a stern gaze. "It would pain Darcy greatly if Jane

came to harm."

Loki eyes flicked over him, and Thor was pleased to see a hint of realization there although Loki covered it quickly with derision. "Asgard's golden prince can't protect one mortal woman who is rarely far from his side?" Thor bit back a response, recognizing the futility and anyway, Loki's mind had obviously gone back to the problem at hand, as he had begun to pace from one side of the room to the other, long legs covering the distance in a few strides.

Ceasing his pacing, Loki returned his attention to Thor. "Yet," he mused, "it is curious that my adversary has suddenly deemed you a conduit to this household. Why now?" The last two words were spoken softly, a question to himself.

"Because he can no longer reach Darcy," stated Thor, certain this was obvious.

"He hasn't tried to reach Darcy. Not tonight. I would have felt it."

"He saw no reason. Knew you'd be prepared."

Loki took another step and then sat on the couch. Elbows on his knees, he leaned forward and smirked at Thor. "So he torments *your* dreams? This is the behavior of my ally, not a foe."

Thor gave him a grudging grin -- because what else could he do? -- and watched Loki's face grow still as he sank into his thoughts, keen mind working busily. Thor's eyes moved up the contours of Loki's face, his thoughts going where he least wanted them to venture.

Pale skin, sharp, refined features, raven black hair. Someone, Sif probably, had once remarked how physically unlike Loki was to Thor and Odin. Thor had dismissed the comment, saying that Loki took after Frigga. What seemed the obvious answer then, now, as Thor's gaze followed the shape of Loki's brow, the angle of his brows, the line of his mouth, seemed like willful blindness. His brother's features, though outwardly Aesir, carried no hint of either of his parents.

Unaware that he did so, Thor squinted as if he could penetrate the spell that hid Loki's heritage. How much of the false mask reflected the true form beneath? Was the visage beneath just as knife-edged and elegant, or did magic conceal thicker, brutish lines? Imagination had never been his strong suit, but Thor tried to picture a version of Loki with ice blue skin and red eyes. Though he didn't succeed, a shudder coiled up his spine, his stomach clutching in--

"Revulsion?" said Loki, his green eyes meeting Thor's. His voice was low, soft tones resonant with malice. "Imagine what I feel, *brother*, looking into the mirror, knowing the obscenity that lurks under this pretense."

Fists clenched, Thor could only return Loki's stare. He knew the correct words were out there, somewhere, but pretty speeches were Loki's purview, and besides, he could not bring himself to say the comforting things required. How could he truly tell Loki it did not matter that he was a frost giant, when the very idea made him sick to his stomach?

Instead, he blurted, "Has Darcy seen your true face?"

"She seeks me out, welcomes me into her bed," was Loki's answer which Thor took to mean "No."

Thor nodded. "But she knows what you are." Rubbing the back of his head, he said sadly, "She first learned the truth from me. I spoke of the matter to Jane, and Darcy was present. We discussed your true form--"

"Darcy knew long before your tongue blundered over my privacy," snapped Loki. "When she isn't

pursuing deeply discounted footwear on the Internet, she entertains herself by creeping about in SHIELD's secure files."

"She...how?" Thor had been led to believe the girl's abilities with Midgard technologies was limited.

"An application, disguised as a primitive game of space battle, designed by Stark." To Thor's next question, Loki explained with a grin, "A gift from Stark's woman, I believe. Never underestimate the duplicity and resourcefulness of women."

Thor's eyes narrowed. "This is how you've pried so ably into SHIELD's business." He doubted Stark would happy knowing Loki and Darcy were using his technology. Then again, the man had almost as great a penchant for mischief as Loki, so perhaps it would amuse him.

Loki gave Thor a smarmy smile. "Life on Midgard has served your mental acuity well."

"Behold the power of the Pop-Tart," responded Thor.

A slight smirk still on his face, Loki turned, eyes on the door, and Thor took in his profile, recalling a distant time when those hard edges were softened by boyish innocence. In his heart, regret rose and thickened his blood. Time here in this desolate outpost of Midgard, particularly his conversations with Jane, had opened his eyes to the part he may have played in the hardening of Loki's heart.

Even as a child, Loki exhibited a taste for good-natured trickery, but there had been no malice in his games, and he had often been kind to a fault, with an aversion for the crueler diversions of the other boys. Ever inquisitive, he had peppered Thor and anyone in the vicinity with the multitude of questions in his mind. Where the other boys found amusement bashing something into ever smaller bits, Loki was more interested in knowing how it was put together, the why, how and when of all things. Had he been born a mortal, he likely would have pursued a vocation like Jane's.

Thor had adored his clever, empathetic little brother, even secretly envied his facility with magic, but Asgard expected its princes to be more than bookish sorcerers, and Thor, determined to protect Loki from everything, including the scorn of the court, had strove to make Loki into a version of himself. And in doing so ruined him.

Jane, of course, would say that he was wrong, that Loki's actions were his alone, but Thor, as his eyes raked over the angry angles that hate and bitterness had wrought on Loki's face, felt otherwise.

"It should not be you," he said. Loki, lost in some distant reverie, responded after a few seconds with a vague irritation and a question in his eyes.

Thor took a moment to compose his words. "Over the course of many campaigns, most in the name of Asgard, I've slain many, leaving far more aggrieved personages who might wish revenge than you ever have."

Loki shrugged. "I was party to those campaigns."

"Often you were the one who argued for a different approach." Much to the annoyance of Thor and all else, who saw Loki's less violent and often magic-dependent solutions as obsequious and dishonorable. "I should be the one who is haunted by the vengeful ghost of a distant victory."

His countenance smooth in the way that signaled a scathing response, Loki studied one of his slim hands, and Thor remembered that recently those fine-boned fingers had been a bloody wreck. His face still tilted downward, Loki slid him a dark look from under his eyebrows. "Victory. In victory,

all that Asgard's golden prince has done is made right, his hands cleansed of blood."

The hate that emanated from his sibling was so potent that Thor flinched slightly, but he nodded and said, "And so it is written in history," echoing a statement Darcy had once made about how history was written by the victor.

Loki returned to his study of his hands. "From what little I recall, even my successes have been writ as transgressions, not victories."

"Nonsense," said Thor, "In my victories, you shared the glory of--"

"A shadow shares no glory," he snarled.

Thor clenched his jaw shut, realizing the conversation was growing too heated and without the moderating influence of the women, likely to escalate. A tiny burr of envy pricked him as he considered Darcy's ability to trade verbal barbs with Loki *without* the interaction turning into a battle. His thoughts moved on to Jane, and his body began to long for bed. Time spent sleeping in whatever crude accommodations were available over the course of many wars had taught him to appreciate beyond measure the comfort of a soft bed and beautiful woman.

He rose to his feet, meeting Loki's cold stare. "Jane still fears you will destroy her friend."

A sly smile on his face, Loki spoke, his tone irreverent, "I destroy everything, don't I?" He made a languid gesture with one hand. "By all means, continue. Sleep eludes me and your lectures are a strong sedative."

It took all Thor's strength not to remind this malevolent shade of his brother that hurting the girl, physically or emotionally, could be the thing that would permanently drive Loki from his heart. He believed that Loki held an authentic fondness for Darcy, but he did not underestimate the power of Loki's hatred for him. Nor had he forgotten the wounds on Loki's body, evidence of a fearsome capacity for self-destruction. Thor knew that Loki's twisted desire to be free from the bonds of brotherhood might drive him to harm the girl, even if he destroyed himself in the process.

He considered his words carefully, and then spoke. "Darcy has a good heart and an inquisitive spirit." *As you once did.* "Do not take that from her." Nothing further to say, he turned for bed.

He had nearly reached the hallway when Loki's voice gave him pause. "I know."

Turning, Thor saw that Loki still sat on the couch, back to him. "That is her...appeal," said Loki. Though the gesture was pointless, Thor gave a faint nod and continued on to bed.



## Chapter 30

### CHAPTER THIRTY

There were two gods in residence at 15 Don Tenorio Road, but Darcy was currently praying to another deity - the god of chocolate. She stood at the end of the hallway, peeking out at the kitchen table where Jane sat surrounded by the usual chaos of papers, a laptop computer before her along, a cup of coffee by her hand.

The luscious scent of chocolate coffee sank into Darcy, taking some of the edge off her nerves. Focusing her attention on the coffee pot, she implored divine cocoa to make Jane amenable to forgiveness. Earlier, in her head, she had played out a scene where she sat down with Jane, issued an eloquent apology, the whole moment turning into the kind of heart-warming drama that would have an audience weeping.

Remembering the crushed look on Jane's face, however, Darcy forgot all her perfect lines. She stared at her feet, urging them forward, but worry and shame kept her anchored to that spot on the carpet (which she noted really needed a good vacuuming).

She might have stood there for most of the morning, except for Bic, who slithered merrily past her and over to the table. Jane startled as the lizard scampered up the denim of her jeans and hopped on the table.

"Sucker is written on my forehead, isn't it?" said Jane, breaking off a bit breakfast bar and setting it on the table.

"In red neon letters," said Darcy. She waved timidly. "Morning."

"Morning." A small smile on her face, Jane studied Darcy, but said nothing more. What felt like hours passed as Darcy stared back, trying to find the right words.

"Awkward," said Jane after a while.

"On a scale of one to awkward, this is, 'Oh, fuck, I've been an asshole, could you ever forgive me? I want to plead temporary insanity, except you know who I'm, uh, dating, so that's bullshit, because there's nothing temporary about my insanity, but I'm sorry, none of this is your fault,'" Darcy took a wheezing breath, "I'm so sorry."

Dropping another snack on the table for Bic, Jane sighed. "It hurt because you were right."

"No." Darcy finally unstuck her feet from the floor and walked to Jane. "I didn't mean what I said."

"I think you did," replied Jane. "You were hurt and angry and what came out was exactly how you felt."

Darcy shook her head, adamant. "Everything I said was bullshit. There's no telling how stuff could have worked out. It could have been worse. Maybe we never met Thor, but we were shopping in Puente Antiguo the day Loki sent his giant metal temper tantrum. And we got...killed."

Jane's brown eyes met hers and Darcy saw a rare vulnerability on her friend's face. Jane was not Loki; she was kind and thoughtful to a fault, but years of struggling to gain credibility within the scientific community for a theory that was derided as sloppy science fiction had given her a tough shell over the softer filling beneath. Now her beautiful face emanated pain. "I never meant to hurt

anyone," Jane said. "How could I have known that the event that night wasn't just a New Mexico thunderstorm? How could I have known a figure out of legend would drop out of the sky and change my life, yours, Erik's...forever?"

"You didn't."

"You're right," Jane said, a touch of heat in her voice, "I didn't know, but I still feel responsible." Looking away, she ran her hand over her head, from front to back, stopping to clench her fingers on her ponytail. "I know I've been selfish, especially to Erik. What you said, it was so true." When she turned to Darcy, a gleam of tears shone in her eyes. "I just didn't expect to hear the truth from you."

Jane's misery tore at Darcy, and she blink dumbly, scrabbling for right words. In a way, Jane was correct. Darcy was speaking from the heart yesterday, voicing a submerged frustration. "I don't think it's that simply, Jane," she said, reaching for a chair. Sliding the chair close to Jane, she sat and timidly put her hand on Jane's. "You can't take responsibility for everything that has happened."

"I made choices that effected others negatively."

"Fuuuck!" Darcy said, drawing the word out. "I'm friends, *friends with benefits*, with Loki, the guy who turned Erik into his minion. How am I ever going to explain my 'choice' to Erik?" Oh, crap, there was a conversation she dreaded more than a root canal. "A lot of what I do is in Thinking is Optional mode."

Squeezing Jane's hand, she added, "I think Thor is partially right about Loki being in crazy-brain when he attacked Earth, but what if I'm wrong? Every choice we make is potentially wrong. We're not perfect. " She shrugged. "And based on recent experience, neither are gods."

Jane turned her hand, folding her fingers around Darcy's. With a slight smile, she angled a glance at her bedroom, where Thor must have been lurking, probably building gridiron armies in fantasy football. "Understatement." Her gaze dropped, no doubt taking in Darcy's bike shorts, T-shirt and iPod. "Did Loki tell you to call SHIELD?"

Darcy didn't answer that question, instead asking, "Are we okay? You and me? Will we be okay?"

"We're more than okay, we're friends, right?" She gave Darcy's hand a reassuring squeeze. "And friends don't let friends--"

"Play naked Twister with supervillains?"

"Like I could stop you," said Jane. "I mean, you can't go biking alone anymore."

Darcy smiled at her friend's concern and stood, turning for the coffee pot. "I know, I know. Loki told me."

This morning Loki had gone with the Darcy is a Crushable Plushy option instead of the usual, sprawling, My Bed, My Kingdom routine. She awoke bound in his arms, suffocating from the dual heat of their bodies and his tight grip, which, when she made to free herself, inched tighter.

"Leggo. I'm mortal. Need air."

"No," he muttered, strong arms closing, squeezing the air from her lungs.

"Yes," she hissed, panicky desperation and oxygen deprivation making a pounding beat in her head. "When it comes...to being mortal...I'm the...expert."

A short eternity of gasping terror passed and then his grip loosened, though not enough to release her. "Not alone. Call SHIELD."

Turning in his arms, she found his eyes closed, his expression still softened by sleep, black hair in adorable disarray. "Is this Loki coma talking, or did Odin sneak in last night and haul off another chunk of your brain?"

"Insolent..." The pleasant expression fell away as twin slits of green glowered at her. "...turn you into a hamster, put you in a cage..." Wearily, he lifted a hand and made a slow spinning motion with his index finger. "Give you a wheel on which to run."

She smiled and wiggled close enough to kiss his cheek. "The transmogrify threat has been upgraded to cute mammal. You really do like me."

"I thrive on the misery you bring." His eyes shut again. "If you must ride the archaic two-wheeled toy, call SHIELD for an escort. Number is...on the fridge."

"I--" Belligerent denial was the default reaction, but she knew it was stupid.

"Swear to me," Loki said, eyes wide and blazing with emotion, "you will not go alone."

Transfixed by his intensity, she had nodded and said without any flippancy, "I promise."

Inhaling the small chocolately steam cloud that rose from her coffee, Darcy smiled, warmed by the smell and the memory of Loki's words. She reached over and pulled a pink sticky note off the fridge, and deciphered the number written in Jane's scrawl. "I'm going to feel like such a dork riding with a black SUV following."

"Pretend you're a celebrity," said Jane, as Darcy sat down. "And be glad Fury is letting you out of the house at all." Darcy raised an eyebrow in question and Jane started to answer, but was interrupted by Bic whose Gimme Breakfast jig was getting downright frantic.

After giving the lizard another little tidbit, Jane explained, "At first, Nick Fury completely forbid you from riding your bike or running, but Loki pointed out that you would just take that as a dare, not a command. So Fury agree to let you go if you called for a security detail."

"Damn," said Darcy. "Based on my reputation, I need a T-shirt that reads, 'Too Stupid to Live.'"

"Maybe just 'Impulsive,'" suggested Jane.

Watching Jane pass more food to Bic, Darcy grinned and said, "And we'll get you a matching shirt that says, 'Softy.'"

Jane nodded, but didn't seem to be listening. Gently petting Bic's tiny head, she said, "How would you like to move to New York City?"

The question came so out of the blue that Darcy responded with an "Eh?"

"I've been talking to Fury." Jane pulled a goofy face. "More like emailing, but I think he's warmed up to the idea of us moving to the New York facility."

"Really? I thought the plan was to keep us out here until we're wearing adult diapers and our tits are sagging to our knees."

Jane glanced reflexively down at her chest. "I, uh, don't know what the plan was, but I've made a

case for us being on the East coast where I'd could have face-time my colleagues, especially, Erik. Plus, there'd be a good chance I could work with Tony Stark, or at least have access to his lab."

Darcy could feel her eyebrows climbing toward her hairline, driven there by a small suspicion. Since when did Jane use the term "face-time?" She asked the obvious question: "And 'us' means you, me, and the Norse tragedy?"

Not looking at Darcy, Jane shook her head. "No. Just you and me."

"What about," *me and Loki?* "you and Thor?"

"We could still see each other," she answered, her smile a little false. "Planes, trains, automobiles, right?"

"Right," said Darcy, fighting against the heat of anger that simmered in her stomach. "Why now? I thought you loved having your own lab."

"I do." Jane paused as they both grinned at Bic, who, annoyed by the lack of treats, had flipped over and was staging a dramatic Shakespearean death scene on the table. "I'd have a lab in New York." She met Darcy's eyes, her face full of determination. "But I'm tired of being marginalized, stuffed in a dusty corner of the world where I do what I'm told, and make useful science, quietly, for SHIELD. My work is valuable, and it's time SHIELD stopped treating me like a second-class citizen."

Her smile grew broader. "You don't want to stuck in a tiny town forever either. New York has theaters and clubs and a real social scene. You're too young to be sitting home every night--"

"So are you," said Darcy with a snort. "You sound like somebody's granny."

"I have my science to keep me warm," said Jane with too much drama. "Besides, you've picked up a lot of valuable skills as my assistant. Eventually, you're going to want to move on. There are more opportunities in New York and the whole region. Maybe you can get SHIELD to pay for law school."

Darcy, who was taking a tentative sip of hot coffee, paused. "Law school." The idea had appeal, enough to distract her from her suspicions about Jane's desire to move to the Big Apple. If SHIELD could afford to build underground fortresses and flying aircraft carriers, it could certainly foot the bill for her J.D. "Maybe, but I bet SHIELD would pack a lot of fine print onto that deal."

Jane nodded. "The kind of fine print that could only be read with an electron microscope." A hint of triumph gleamed in her eyes. "You know you want to go. It'll be fun. And Erik says he misses us both."

"Erik," stated Darcy flatly, her mind working at a speed that amazed her. Maybe Loki's smarts were infectious. "He knows about Loki and me."

Jane squirmed in a way that either meant she'd developed a spontaneous ass rash or Darcy was right. "No. Yes."

"He wants us to move to New York. To get me away from Loki."

Slumping slightly forward, Jane grasped the sides of the laptop and stared blankly at the screen. "I really want to move, Darcy. But, yes, Erik is worried about you."

"You told him about Loki and me...?"

"No, he doesn't know that you..." her voice trailed off.

"That I had sex with Loki," Darcy finished helpfully. "What does he know?"

"Not that much, really. And I haven't told him how close you two have become, but he knows you're friends." Jane smiled sort of apologetically. "He figured it out on his own."

"How?"

"Blame your mouth." Jane grinned weakly. "When Loki moved in, Erik worried that your, um, habit of saying whatever was on your mind was going to be a problem. He regretted telling you to stay, and was convinced he'd talked you into your death."

"But the weeks went by and you mouthed off to Loki and Loki either ignored you, or growled a threat but never followed through with it." Bic still lay on her back, tip of her tail twitching in frustration. Jane reached out and rubbed a finger over the little reptile's white belly. "Erik kept saying, 'At least you have Thor to protect you, Jane.' I knew guilt was eating him up. So I told him the truth, that you and Loki get along in a weird kind of way. That you seem to like each other."

She picked Bic up and set her, right side up, on her hand. "That's when he decided Loki had brainwashed you somehow."

Darcy let out a snort of laughter. "Right. To gain control of my one superpower? Finding designer shoes at outlet prices?"

Jane took a bite of what remained of her breakfast bar, chewed and swallowed. "Who knows with Loki. Maybe it's part of some long game strategy?"

"You believe this, too?" Petulant, Darcy swirled her coffee cup gently, as if it were a glass of wine. "The super hot, genius supervillain couldn't possibly want to hook up with the incompetent research assistant because he likes her. It must be more mischief, right?" *I will not be insecure, I will not be insecure.*

"I *believe* he's conniving and evil." Jane winced at her own bluntness. "You're smart and funny and beautiful. He doesn't deserve you."

Jane stretched out her arm so that Bic could hop off and sit on the table near Darcy. "Where Thor goes, Loki does too," she said with an apologetic smile. "It's not like you'll never see him again. And it's not like I can force you to move. Just think about it, okay?"

Darcy scooped Bic up and plopped the lizard on her shoulder. Taking another sip of the chocolate-tinged coffee, she thought about all the little Loki-made things in her life and tried not to get all maudlin. Maybe it would be for the best. After all, he would leave her if he could; if someone dropped the Tesseract in his lap, he'd dance to its tune like it was a shiny, magic disco ball, all thoughts of Darcy Lewis supplanted by glorious purposes.

If she moved to New York, she'd be the one in control, she'd be the one to do the leaving.

*"You already have too much of me."*

Closing her eyes, she remembered the look on Loki's face when he spoke those words, shattered, defeated, angry. Like he-he what? Like he needed her. And just like that, she felt guilty for even considering moving to New York.

And yet, when Jane prodded her again, "You'll think about it, right?" Darcy's mouth formed the

word "No," but something else came out.

"Yeah," she said, "I'll think about it."

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Darcy didn't count herself as naive - impulsive, okay, but not naive - but she didn't think trailing behind the science assistant on a bike ride through un-scenic Puente Antiquo was a good use of SHIELD's guards' time, even with was a murderous elf on the loose. She had pedaled along the same stretch of sparsely populated road for weeks, months, and the worst that had ever happened was the occasional truckload of male migrant workers who would called out, "Oye, mami chula!" and make kissing noises at her. In her car, she had driven around the state, all alone, unintentionally putting herself in easy reach of Loki's nemesis. And, of course, she'd spent the last few months trying to reach any base with the killer's sidekick. At the reminder of Sean's betrayal, her breath caught on the lump in her throat.

She cranked down on the pedals, generating a burst of speed through a patch of sand-covered asphalt, the sediment washed there by last night's thunderstorm. "And here I am," she muttered, "ten fingers, ten toes, alive and snarking."

Also, although her knowledge of elves didn't extend beyond Orlando Bloom's Legolas, she didn't think a handful of humans with guns were a match against a creature whose magic probably rivaled Loki's. And she suspected that Loki felt the same way, and that he "allowed" her to leave the house because he didn't believe that the killer's next move would be snatching her off the road.

"More games," she muttered.

Because she figured that her SHIELD escort shouldn't come all the way out for a short ride, and because Fury had told Jane to work from home for the remainder of the week, her ride extended a few more miles than usual.

When she got back, Loki was in his room, sitting on his bed, tapping away on her laptop. Pausing in the hallway, on the way to take a shower, she watched him for a few seconds. His black hair was damp from a shower and with his lanky build he looked like an overgrown teen. She smiled, tried to imagine a teenage Loki and Thor, and came up with an image that resembled any television show where incredibly beautiful twenty-somethings played high school kids.

She started for the bathroom and then stopped, wondering if she should reclaim the computer before he reorganized the world economy or something worse. Thinking back on the recent economic crisis, she decide he couldn't do much worse than mere mortal bankers and financiers had, and continued on her way. Besides he was male. Probably he was simply downloading naughty videos.

After her shower, she dressed, dried her hair and texted a friend. That activity ate up about an hour before her friend, who had a life, signed off to go live it. Darcy sat on her bed, which was neatly made--not by her, by Loki, with magic because manual labor gave him hives--and stared out the window. The magic-repelling stick bug swayed in the swamp cooler's breeze and her new rose glittered in the diffused sunlight. "Pretty, pretty," she said, "I'm so bored."

What the hell was she supposed to do if she couldn't go to work or leave the house without an armed escort? She slid a look in the direction of the living room, where Jane was now camped, nose buried in data. If she was a good assistant, she would march out there and offer assistance.

If.

Instead she wandered into Loki's room and flung herself, face down, on Thor's old bed. Loki was dismantling something that looked like the cross between a waffle iron and a small canon. "I'm bored," she said. "What do filthy rich, Asgardian princes do for fun," she turned her head and eyed the device, "when they aren't taking stuff apart?"

"Ask Thor," he said. "He's the Asgardian prince."

"So are you."

"No, I'm not," he said, without the usual venom.

"Yeah-huh, you are. Why do you keep reminding me, 'I'm Loki, of Asgard'?"

"Habit," he replied, weirdly cheerful.

Because her boobs didn't like being squished, she rolled onto her back. "Whether you're this color," she gestured in his direction, "or blue, you're still Prince Loki of Asgard."

A quiet squeak of metal on metal was her only answer. After a couple of minutes, he said, "Does it bother you?" He pointed at his face with a small screwdriver. "That this is a falsehood?"

She shook her head, and stared up at the ceiling. "Nope. I think it's mysterious and sexy. You didn't answer my question. What do you do for fun?" Feeling his eyes on her, she met his stare. "What?"

"You are a peculiar creature." His face held a mixture of amusement and disbelief.

"My question, Loki."

"You are bored and think I might alleviate your tedium." He smiled, all white teeth and mischief and Darcy felt her heart race. "My entertainment here on Midgard has been rather destructive, but if that's what you have in mind--"

"Ugh! Come on! Even if all the mythology books were true, you obviously didn't spend every second making chaos."

He shrugged and separated a strip of metal from the device, setting the piece on the bed. "For the most part, I do what's fun."

"That's okay, so long as nobody dies and there's no property damage."

"Define damage."

"Nothing more extreme than graffiti. You know, like 'Loki was here.' Blowing up buildings is totally out."

"Not even one very small building?" he asked with exaggerated wistfulness.

Darcy eyed him warily, wondering what he'd been smoking (and if he'd share). "You can blow up the shed." She pointed in the direction of said building.

His gaze followed her finger and he grinned again, and Darcy thought she might consider destroying a few buildings herself if it would get him to smile like that more often. "Tell me about Asgard. Tell me about you."

"Ask Odin. He's the current owner of my memories."

"You are such a pain in the ass!" said Darcy, sitting up and looking skyward, imploring any spirit, divine or otherwise, for patience. "You remember some stuff and the parts you don't, well, just make something up. Entertain me, Silvertongue." She folded her legs, lotus style, and stared at him expectantly.

"Thor loves to tell stories," he said, almost cautiously.

"Stories about Thor, and battle, and Thor. Boring." She waved a hand imperiously at him. "Start talking, Mad Science."

Darcy had always known that Loki would be a better storyteller than Thor. Even when he and his brother had only lived in Puente Antiguo a couple of months and Loki's only utterances were, "Move," and the friendlier, "Move, impudent mortal girl." Thor's stories were like a summer blockbuster, full of braggadocio, loud and explosive, and yet ironically free of much gore (to keep a PG-rating), and weak on plot and character development.

Loki's were more art house film with a fantasy element, full of vivid backdrops, and stopping to focus tightly on what seemed like an irrelevant detail, but what was actually the heart of the story. Mostly he told her about the places he went alone, his secret hideaways from Thor and everyone else in Asgard.

And she listened, captivated, as he told her about a place, high in the mountains where rainbows, a special variety of magical rainbows, were born, and the lonely plain, with blood red soil and deep purple grass, where they died. There was the strange stretch of beach, where every day a thick churning fog bank rolled over the place where sand met sea, picking up everything in its path, and leaving in its wake, strange artifacts and the bodies (nothing survived being in the fog) of alien creatures from unknown worlds.

There was the spot, on a tall mesa, where glass dragons bred and raised their young, where the high altitude and thin atmosphere allowed the maximum amount of sunlight to penetrate their translucent bodies and fuel their activities. Loki noted that this place in particular, he kept secret from Thor, who would have rounded up the Warriors Three and Sif and immediately gone dragon hunting.

"Maybe you shouldn't tell me," Darcy observed. "Loose lips, you know?"

"You hate spiders," was his response.

"Yeah, so?"

"And yet, when you found one in your closet, you demanded that I, 'Magic it outside, where it belongs,' rather than kill it."

She shrugged and repeated what she had said then, "It can't help being horrible. It just is."

"If you'll spare the life of a creature that you despise, you would never be party to the extinction of a noble species."

Darcy nodded. "Point." She was lying on her side on Thor's bed, head on a pillow, watching him as he spoke. A painful knot pulled in her neck and she sat up and stretched. Feeling the fierce pressure of his stare, she turned and found him giving her that look; the scalpel-sharp scrutiny that threatened to carve out all her secrets.

"You should go," he said.



It was fortunate she was sitting on the bed, because those three words, spoken softly with no menace, carried force. She knew what he meant, realized what he must have overheard. What remained unclear, however, was whether they also indicated that she meant so little to him that he could shrug and watch, detached, as she moved far away. She feigned ignorance.

"You're kicking me out of your room? Your moods have more swings than a playground."

His gaze move up her face and stopped on a spot high on her head. Meeting her eyes, he said, "Games, Darcy? I thought we'd established that you lack the duplicity for intrigue."

She frowned, thinking that lately he'd gotten a little too good at reading her, as if he'd somewhere discovered a dictionary for Darcyese. And speaking of games, she also remembered that she hadn't asked him about his games, why he let her out of the house at all when a dangerous killer was supposedly stalking him. She decided to stick to the matter at hand. "You're having another pity party, in honor of you being a very bad man who doesn't deserve cake, ice cream, a pony and a...a friend."

His smile playful, he said, "I have been very bad."

"Yes, you have. But I think you're still burdened with a terrible conscience."

The smile disappeared and something dangerous roiled in his eyes. "I do not."

"Yes, you do. If you didn't, why push me away? Why not just take what you want and keep doing what's fun? Hell, why even bother chatting me up, when you could minion-ize my brain and just fuck me?"

"Perhaps," he said, words cloaked in smooth menace, "I considered doing just that."

A shiver ran up her spine because she knew there was some truth to his response. "But you didn't."

Abruptly sullen, he dropped his gaze to the bed where he sat, one hand picking a metal gewgaw off the bedspread and spinning it between two fingers so fast that it hummed. "You," he began, not looking up, "you need a far better place than this, something grander, filled with life and energy."

*I need you. "So do you." Maybe we could find that place together.*

His attention fell to his feet. "I've had all the like of that, many times over, for longer than you can imagine." He closed his eyes and she felt his emotions hit her, an almost concussive sadness, so very not-Loki. "For you there is no luxury of time."

"Then don't waste my time with the Edward Cullen routine." This reference stumped him and she smirked at the confusion on his face. "*Twilight*. Edward Cullen follows Bella around, whining that he's not good enough for her, just to hear Bella tell him he's a good guy, worth loving, blah-blah-blaaaaaah."

Loki mirror her smirk. "Our dynamic is nothing like that at all. You delight in telling me I'm evil."

"Fuck yeah. I'm no Bella Swan."

"If I followed where you went, the contempt you've experienced here, in this small place, because of our friendship, would be but a shadow of what would be heaped upon you in the world beyond."

Darcy responded with a teenage eye roll. "You're starting to sparkle," she warned.

Undaunted, he said, "There's the matter of my parentage, what I truly am."

"Really? You think I care about that? If I can get past everything *else* about you?"

He waved a hand at his face, himself. "What lies beneath, is a monster."

She ran her tongue over her top front teeth and leered at him. "I bet frost giant Loki is pretty cute, too." She emphasized her point with wiggle of her eyebrows.

For a second, she actually thought he blushed, but it was difficult to tell, because he stood up and started to pace the tiny bedroom.

"Look, you can keep making your case for how wicked you are. Or..." she panned a long look up and down his body, "you can take me back to my bedroom and show me."

He stopped pacing and stared at her, a slight smile on his mouth. "You're quite mad, you know?"

"Takes one to know one. Are you going to do something with that mouth besides talk, Silvertongue?"

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"Show me the real you."

She was lying on her back, with Loki crouched over her, lavishing delicious torment on her by simply etching a tingling, invisible line of magic along the top of her breast, following the edge of her bra.

Abruptly, he leaned back, head turned slightly, eyeing her warily. "Why would you want such a thing?"

"Because I want you, all of you."

His face still as a statue, he studied her. "My true nature was only revealed with the touch of a frost giant or in the presence of the Casket of Ancient Winters. Odin's magic is strong."

Her brain was fizzy with lust, but she still saw the evasion in his eyes, heard the prevarication in his words. "You can peel it back if you really want to, huh?"

Anger boiled in his emerald eyes. "You cannot ask--"

"I'm not asking." She sat up and grabbed his face locking her eyes with his. "I'm demanding." The typical I-am-Loki-of-Asgard arrogance stiffened his posture, a hard line appearing between his dark brows and his gaze went cold, but she didn't back down. "I know you don't plan on sticking around here much longer, but in the meantime, you're..." The word reached her mouth and retreated. *Say it.* She licked her lips, trying push the word out. "You're *mine* and I want everything."

The ice in his eyes thawed a little. "Darcy, I will not--"

"Yes, you will," she snapped, ignoring his irritation at being interrupted. "Because one of these days you're going to leave, and all I'll have left is...this, now." She lifted her shoulders and chin in a nonchalant shrug, her fingers unfastening a strap on his clothing. "Show me the real you, Loki. Think of it as a parting gift." The strap came undone, and she now, quite expertly, reached beneath the freed layer of leather to the next piece of the puzzle.

When she looked up, he was studying her, his demeanor unnaturally still. "Just once," she begged.

"Maybe when you're inside me, because that would be awesome like chocolate."

With an exasperated snarly sigh, he firmly but gently grasped her wrists and pulled her hands away from their task. "This is truly what you want?"

"Uh-huh." She smiled at him brightly. "Leggo." He released her hands, and watched, strangely passive and sort of broken as she deftly peeled off his clothing. He remained in this trancelike state until she reached his pants, at which point, he reengaged with the moment and together they freed each other of their remaining clothing.

The Loki who made love to her was almost a stranger, not because he had dropped the magic that hid the person beneath -- he hadn't, yet -- but because this Loki was almost awkward, unsure of himself. His every touch still set her nerves on fire with passion, but there was a hesitancy in his motions, as if he feared moving too fast.

The languid pace was exquisite, but the belligerent part of Darcy chafed at what she knew was a stalling tactic on his part. Frustrated and desperate for him, she pulled him onto her, guiding him down to fill the empty need inside her. As they fell into a delirious, primitive rhythm, he kept his eyes on her face, gaze devouring her as if he might never see her again. Obviously as lost to the moment as Darcy, his motions were again filled with certainty and he pummeled her with a possessive beat that lit up every pleasure neuron in her brain. She clung to him, her body more alive than it had ever been, nearly all capacity for coherent thought gone.

*No. I still want-* She bit her lip, struggling to form words. "Show me, Loki," she managed. "Show me."

There was a pause in the perfect rhythm. "Darcy--"

"Please."

With an anguished sigh, his body sagged over hers, forehead pressed into the pillow next to her head. Connected as they were, his torment rained down on her. A small corner of her brain wanted to say something comforting, but it was hard to think, much less speak with the heat of him on her, in her, surrounding her with a yummy maleness.

Loki hadn't lied about the power of Odin's enchantment. The battle between it and Loki's will rippled over her skin, cinnamon clashing with something that smelled ancient, unyielding, like the roots of some tall mountain. Her lover's body became a battlefield between a venerable, almost primeval power and younger, upstart magic. For a minute it felt like Loki's newer, more energetic magic couldn't possibly prevail; all it could do was worry at Odin's like a small dog nipping at a horse's heels. But Darcy's faith in Loki's ability wasn't unfounded. Surrender began as a illusory flicker of magic, not much more than the swimmy specks one might see in the edges of their vision when staring up at a bright sky, bright motes where Odin's magic failed. This she felt rather than actually saw, but as Odin's illusion beat a temporary retreat, the effect moved to her vision and she blinked at the truth it revealed.

Though she thought she was prepared, this Loki took her breath away, his ice blue skin, yes, but more so his eyes, whose crimson shade should have scared her. But their expression, unvarnished worry, made what might have been fearsome, simply exotic. Stripped of their false robe of green, his eyes stared at her with a breathtaking honesty. She shifted her hips, finding him still seated hard and deep within her, and wrapped her legs around his.

"Wow. I was so wrong." She closed her eyes, biting her lip. Opening them again, she saw the beginnings of regret in his expression. "Everyday Loki isn't beautiful. He's just seriously hot." She

lifted her hand to his face, feathering a touch over his cheek, tracing the line of a chin that she knew almost as well as her own, except the skin beneath her fingers felt softer, as if the usual illusion somehow made it feel harder. "This is...beautiful."

Moving under him, she urged him on, and he complied, but once again, in a cautious way, as though he half expected her to shove him off and scream like some ditz in a horror movie. If she were in her right mind, and not half crazy with the electric passion of him, the *real* him, and magic, she would have smacked him (for all the good it would do). Nothing mattered though, because Loki fully revealed to her, at his most vulnerable pushed her beyond, to the place where self melted and gave way to shivering waves of ecstasy.

A while later, sprawled half on him, she traced a finger down the middle of his chest over skin that was now the usual color. "Encore?" she said slowly, feeling the delicious after-sex laziness.

The little vibration of a bitter chuckle moved through her. "No. I'm spent."

"Bullshit." Her finger moved lower and slid sideways, to draw spirals over a hip bone. "You're immortal. You should be good for a few more servings today, each with a side of frosty."

His response was to take her in his arms and pull her--with that disturbingly strong ease--onto him. Hands on her upper arms, he pushed her up slightly, so their eyes met. "Frosty?" He grimaced. "In your company, Asgard's prison, by comparison, seems a holiday resort."

She smirked. "Will I get some dining with all the whining?"

He cocked his head to the side, assessing her and she returned the favor, looking for traces of his other side and finding them in the shape of his angular face and his lean body, which was pretty much unchanging, no matter what his skin color. "How can it not repel you?" The question, spoken softly, didn't really seem to be addressed to her.

"Because," she said, squirming and wriggling free of his grasp to snuggle down on his chest, "I haven't had people telling me, for centuries, that frost giants are bad."

In the silence that followed, his heart thumped in her ear and his chest rose and fell with a slow sigh. His hand stroked the back of her head and fingers combed through her hair, and she closed her eyes, enjoying the simply touch.

"Tell me 'nother story," she said.

"No," he replied. "Your turn."

"Got no stories. Midgard life. No magic. Bo-ring."

He laughed softly. "You forget, your experiences are as alien to me, as mine to you." With that he flipped her off him, so that she ended up on her side facing him.

"Entertain me, impudent girl," he said with a flash of teeth, and compelled by the power of that smile, Darcy started talking.

# Chapter 31

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

### Duet in C-Flat Major

Loki awoke in deepest night to the warmth of a lover in his arms, in her bed, and to a returning memory that informed him that this simply wasn't something he did. That was the way of it lately: bits of himself returning like weeds repopulating a salted field.

With an ease born from this small assembly of returned memories, he disentangled himself from Darcy and slipped out of bed without waking her, just as he had done with countless other lovers throughout the centuries. He trusted no one, least of all those who took him into their bed. Sleep was a vulnerable state, and his habit was to take his pleasure and slip away to the spell-guarded safety of his own quarters.

He stood and examined the tiny room and its contents, including the young woman in the bed, all familiar now, but, thanks to the returned memory, wreathed in wrongness. Because Loki did not surrender to sentiment and risk dispassionate indifference in exchange for a few hours' pleasant distraction.

Backing up a step, eyes on the woman, he grimaced at the realization that he had slept at her side even without the inducement of sex. What had she done to him? Was it some enchantment? He glowered at the closet, where the shirt she had taken from him hung, wondering if it was part of some spellwork she'd cast against him.

His thoughts chasing thoughts driven by a sudden paranoia, he was nonetheless struck by the memory of the morning after they'd first done more than sleep. He had crouched over her, wary as now, watching her sleep, wondering if she was the echo of a cruel trick played on a very young version of himself. That she would open her eyes and sneer at the fool who thought himself in love.

But when she'd opened her blue eyes, there had been no deceit, just genuine happiness at finding him there. This confirmed by the bits of color in her hair, placed there by him and designed to reflect her moods and inner thoughts. When she was prevaricating, their shade moved to cyan and cerulean. At that moment the dominant color was deepest purple with hints of magenta. Happiness warmed by the beginnings of lust.

He had to admit, he felt a touch of guilt for the artifice, for prying into her mind in this way, but without this trickery, she was infuriatingly obtuse, in a way no mortal woman should be. And anyway, he reasoned, the "lowlights" didn't allow him access to her thoughts, but were merely a measure of cast off energy from her emotions.

Still, he felt guilt.

Which annoyed him.

Actually, it sort of enraged him, except in his present position there wasn't much to be done with rage, so he minimized his frustration like a window on a computer, putting it aside for the time being.

There was also the matter that when he looked at her, as he did now, something seized his heart and clenched it with an iron fist, withering all his magnificent, maleficent fury to an insipid fondness. She muttered in her sleep and he tensed, his senses -- magical and mundane -- exploring

the room, as he took a step closer to the bed. He didn't miss the significance of that action, the instinctive protectiveness that moved him to her side, testing the atmosphere for signs of his adversary's influence.

Detecting nothing, he glowered down at her. What had she done to him? What was she?

At the sight of her pretty face, his suspicion felt ridiculous. Though her tongue was often honed by excessive honesty, there was no cruelty in her. There was a peculiar kindness to her, though nothing like the driveling sort practiced by Jane. Darcy's was more that of an old soul, one who had experienced too much to partition the world into neat little black and white categories.

*Old soul.*

An idea set him back on his heels, and he backed away, his eyes sweeping over her small landscape, the fair curve of her shoulder, the swell of a breast, the dark circle of areola and nipple, that he knew was utterly mortal (though he often ignored that fact). Brain occupied with possibilities, it neglected his feet and they caught on the carpet. He tripped and landed, with un-Loki-like clumsiness, on his arse.

Still sitting in an disorganized sprawl, he stared up at the bed through the darkness, where one of her feet made a small tent of the bedcovers.

Was it possible? If so, it would explain her acceptance of his true self, though, to be honest, her reaction hadn't soothed him as much as one might have expected. True, it was a relief to know that should the illusion fail, she wouldn't recoil in fear. But when he had looked down and seen blue skin between her creamy thighs, his predominant emotion had been horror. And antipathy at the sight of this revolting stranger soiling *his* Darcy. And yes, however conflicted he felt, he thought of her in the possessive, because at this point in his long life, she was more his than anything had been in centuries.

Outside, a dog barked. Loki rose to his feet. Darcy turned in her sleep, onto her side, and pulled her knees toward her chest in the slight chill of the night. Though hating the tenderness she brought out in him, he approached and pulled the covers up over her shoulders and to her neck.

Without another look he strode to the door and out to his room.

*His room.* He sneered at the enclosure. Hardly fitting a prince of Asgard, but more than appropriate for the cast-off plaything of Odin. A flick of fingers and a globe of light sprang to life, illuminating his latest project, bits of metal and plastic strewn across the bed. He sat on the only clear space and began to work.

Odin's magic. It was a cruel irony that the one bit of Odin's wizardry that Loki least wanted to defeat -- the work that kept his cold nature hidden -- was the one Loki could unravel. All while the stuff that bound him to Thor was an impregnable prison.

But Odin had made one mistake. He had assumed that the only tool available to Loki was magic. Midgard's technology, on the other hand... What was Midgardian technology if not the mortals' means of circumventing their inability to manipulate magic the proper way? It was a tool, a crude tool, but sometimes a hammer -- he grimaced at the analogy - was more effective than a scalpel.

So alone in the night, he set to work on his hammer.

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Alone. Darcy sighed, rolling onto her back and stretching her arms and legs like she was making a

snow angel, her limbs encountering nothing but bed.

He'd left her. Probably not for good, since he was still magically handcuffed to Thor, but she was alone all the same.

This. This is what it would be like when he went AWOL for good; when he figured out (and she knew he'd succeed) how to beat his old man at magic. Darcy Lewis all by herself in bed, listening to the sounds of the desert night, in a house trailer -- cough, make that "manufactured home" -- on the outskirts of Puente Antiguo, the place where it all started.

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The spell spluttered, then fired like a mortal's combustion engine, and then faltered and died and would not start again no matter what Loki tried. Of course, Midgardian tech alone would not be the key to freeing him from Odin's prison. He needed a touch of magic as well.

Dark despair quickened his breath and heart rate. If he couldn't do this, if Odin had so stymied him, broken all that he was...

A hideous wailing rent the air and for a breath he thought he was the origin before he recognized the eerie call of the desert's native trickster, the coyote. Temporarily calmed from his frustration, he cast an idle thread of awareness in Darcy's direction, checking again that she was safe from any other's influence.

He thought of her sleeping alone on the bed and before his mind's eye a pattern arose, skeins of green magic woven with bands of golden energy, promising a path to a solution. Loki drew back, the implication clear but still unsettling.

That she had somehow been used to catch and store some lost aspect of himself seemed more and more likely. The question was, by who? His enemies? Himself? If so, how could either have known that his path would intersect with this particular mortal?

Though a creature of fate and prophecy, Loki never really put much stock in either, seeing the future as an ever changing web of possibilities. How then could anyone have foreseen this? Maybe it wasn't foreseen, but seen, with the observer set in the future, looking back?

He traced a finger over one completed side of the device. Whether this was his (he suspected it was, since it was terribly clever) or his enemies' plot, he needed her for now. *For always*, a voice ghosted, but he brushed it aside.

The part of him that spoke those words, rolled its eyes and sneered, amused at how quickly he latched onto a non-sentimental reason to keep the woman's company, but Loki ignored that as well. He had work to do; the completion of this device, even with this new insight, might still take days.

Picturing her face, remembering the taste and smell of her, he surrendered and let his body remember how to cast the spell.

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Darcy had drifted into a light sleep when he returned. His arm wrapped around her waist and she thought he was just going to fold himself around her. Instead, he lifted her and marched out of her room.

"Whuh-?" she muttered sleepily when he set her in his bed and climbed in beside her, tucking her in his arms. Her nose twitched; the room smelled like cinnamon and hot solder gun. What had he

been doing? She snuggled against his chest, sliding a leg over his hip, rocking her hips, the allure of him waking up every part of her body.

"Enough," he growled, though she could hear the smile in his voice. "I brought you here to sleep." He rearranged her against him, her back to his chest.

She closed her eyes, decision made. He had returned this time, but he wouldn't always.

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The next morning, day two of their exile to the trailer, Darcy did her usual thing. She jumped a sleepy, morning Loki and got what he owed her from last night. Then rode her bike, showered, surfed the Internet, fiddled around on her phone, and even helped Jane out a bit with work.

At one o'clock, Thor dragged Jane outside, Loki in tow. Someone had given him a football and in the absence of anyone with testosterone he had to settle for Jane and Darcy as receivers and quarterbacks.

Darcy, who liked the letter "I" too much to be part of a team, wandered away after a few minutes to sit in the sun on the top step of the porch and read a book. Bic stretched out on the top rail of the porch and dozed.

Loki, of course, snarled at Thor's entreaties to play catch, and retreated to the back of the old airplane cabin to work on his latest doomsday device.

A light breeze fluttered the pages of Darcy's book, carrying a slight nip of fall and the faint smell of roasting chile. She leaned against the porch rail and closed her eyes, warm and sleepy in the sun. What would she be doing in New York right now? What would it be like to wake up there every morning, to the sound of traffic and the energy of thousands of people waking up as well? She imagined herself finding some little eatery, a place to stop every morning on the way to work where she'd grab a bagel and coffee.

*It won't be chocolate coffee.* Okay, so maybe she'd use the magical coffee maker and only stop for the bagel. She dozed for a while, dreaming of bright lights and big cities.

She awoke when the book hit the step next to her and to the sensation of almost falling off the step. Scooping up the book, she stood, yawning. Jane laughed, and football under her arm, made a pathetic attempt to dart around Thor, who snagged her easily with one powerful arm, pulling her to him. Kissing happened and Darcy grinned and glanced toward Loki's lair.

He was approaching the house, long legs eating up the distance between them, tall, lanky, and despite the Asgard-lite clothing, looking oddly at home against the desert backdrop, an outlaw in black, missing only a weathered black hat and a pistol strapped low on his hip. She licked her lips, trying to remember all the reasons why she shouldn't need this man.

A moment later, Thor loomed up to him, blocking his path and offering him the football. Loki's mouth didn't move, but his expression said, "Seriously?" Darcy wavered, considering going over and doing the interference thing before Loki let loose some verbal offense on his poor brother.

Thor, with the usual indomitable spirit when it came to his sibling, said something and a smile cracked through Loki's cranky expression. Loki spoke and whatever he said must not have been too bite-y because Thor clapped him firmly on the back, laughing. Though he winced at the blow, sly humor glittered in Loki's eyes. Her vision wavered and for a second both men were dressed in formal Asgard clothing, tall and gleaming, a vision of a past never to return.



And Darcy felt an odd touch of jealousy.

Of course, she didn't begrudge Thor his five seconds of congeniality with Loki. Nevertheless, inside her, a deep longing rose; derived from the sense that she was born in the wrong time, in the wrong skin, too young, painfully immortal. She suddenly wished to be someone, *anyone* from Thor's stories. Maybe one of the women, Sif, Frigga, or even Sigyn, any person who had witnessed encounters like this one on Asgard, anyone who had been a part of their lives throughout the centuries. An irrational envy moved through her like poison, and she hated the fact that so much of Loki's life had transpired without her. So much that it felt like another barrier between them. Turning her eyes to the blue sky, she breathed through the dark emotions that grew in her, trying to push them away.

When she yanked herself from her sad reverie, Loki had already extracted himself from Thor's company and was nearly at the steps. With one easy stride, he stopped one step below her, still taller than her. "Dire news?" he said mockingly. "Your iPod isn't working?"

She cocked her head, confused.

"You are bleeding melancholy," he explained.

She deflected. "You should humor the big guy. Toss the pigskin a few times. Go Team Asgard."

"There is no Team Asgard," Loki snapped. "Only Team Thor, or Odin." In a blink, he joined her on the porch, turning to glare at his not-brother. "All else are but shadows."

The sun beat down on them and she dropped her gaze from the hot glare, eyes falling on her own shadow, elongated, but not so much as the taller shadow that merged with hers. She nudged him with her elbow. "Hey." With a nod down at their shadows, she said, "Everybody needs a shadow, it's how you know you're standing in the light." She knew it was a full-of-shit platitude, but she couldn't resist.

Visage still grim, his eyes moved from her face down to the ground. Their eyes met and then he laughed. "Thor is right about one thing."

"About what?"

He considered her for a moment, back stiff and regal, then relaxed and dropped his arm over her shoulder, pulling her close to him. The gesture was sort of comradely or brotherly, like what she'd seen Thor do to him, except she didn't snarl as Loki would, because it was kind of awesome.

"You make me smile," he said.

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Just like that, there she was, warm and his, tucked against him as though she'd always been there. Perhaps she had. He had not figured out the mystery of what she was, beyond an ordinary mortal, but even now he could feel power and self slowly coming home in her presence. Worse yet, however he might try to frame his requirement for her in terms of practicality and scheming, he was at the mercy of simple (or perhaps, complicated) emotion.

Jane and Thor were standing near the road, as far as the invisible yoke between him and Loki would allow. Hand in hand they stared off into the distance, talking and laughing. *Soon, brother, we'll both be free.*

And then, before leaving this place, he'd deal with the murderous elf once and for all. Something

about the entire matter still bothered him, and as he eyed Thor, a theory niggled his mind. But freeing himself from Odin's spell was the foremost problem; he'd deal with the elf later.

Jane laughed and leaned against Thor, and Loki considered her. His fantasy of killing her had lost its allure, had even become vaguely distasteful. Perhaps because he thought the woman suffered enough in Thor's boorish company. He still found her insipid and bland, but had to admit she was quite possibly the best of the many who had warmed Thor's bed. From what he could remember, anyway.

Jane was intelligent, likely more so than most in Asgard. He had to concede that immortality made the Aesir and other immortals intellectually lazy. Without the urgency of mortality, why learn today what you could learn next week or a century from now? "Tomorrow" soon became "never." In truth, Jane and Darcy both would probably find their Asgardian contemporaries, even those centuries older, tedious and moronic. He couldn't see either woman stomaching the hours of chatter regarding dresses and jewelry that occupied Asgard's noblewomen's time.

In his head, he smiled. Darcy did have a fondness for footwear, but her interest was that of a hunter seeking the perfect, discounted prey. Beyond modeling her latest acquisitions, with a twirl and bit of flourish that he found annoyingly adorable, she didn't devote excessive verbiage or thought to the matter of shoes.

He sat on the porch's weathered wood surface, and flicked a finger at a scale of white, peeling paint. On Asgard, such things would be maintained with magic and never allowed to look so worn. In the palace, at any rate. Darcy sat as well, and he dropped his arm around her shoulders again.

The woman at his side was small and fragile, as mortals were. But her mortality wasn't the most pressing issue. There were ways around that, none easy, but certainly not beyond the cunning of a trickster.

A greater question was would she be willing to follow him off Midgard and beyond? How would she view a life on the run, necessary as he would not only be a fugitive from Asgard's justice, but still bedeviled by the likes of Thanos. She didn't lack in adventurous spirit, but eventually his honor -- a shriveled and desiccated thing, sure -- would demand that he give her something more. If only because at some point, nature might prevail over any efforts otherwise, and his seed leave her with a child in the womb. He couldn't very well drag a family from one dark corner of the realms to another forever.

Presently, the notion of avenging himself against Odin had slipped from the top of his list of mischief that must be done immediately. But someday he'd return to Asgard. If only, for Darcy's sake.

Was this young woman truly able to face Asgard's cruelties? He grinned, imagining the scandalized expressions on the face of the court sycophants and toddlers when she unsheathed her sharp wit.

A more apt question: was he ready to manage in any capacity that wasn't alone? He had operated in solitude for so long that loneliness had become a fuel.

A bit of gray flashed in the corner of his vision and he dropped his gaze to see his creation, the little dragon-lizard that was now hers (as he was) land on her denim-clad knee. He scoured a look over her clothing, imagining her in more worthy garments. No wonder it took him so long to notice her beauty -- the bee stung lips, ample breasts, exquisite hips and thighs -- dressed as such. If she were at his side when he returned to The Realm Eternal, he see that she wore the finest that Asgard had to offer.

The tightness in his chest returned and he named it for what it was -- love. Until now, a memory, not an emotion. He had loved. Once. Lovers. Sigyn. Even Odin and Thor. If he had to admit it, Frigga, still.

For the sake of power and freedom, he'd cast aside the ability to love long ago. To have it return now, and bestowed on a silly girl who refused to fear him properly was almost...bittersweet.

Darcy watched Thor and Jane and Loki watched her, took in her smile with the slight gap between her two top front teeth, the way her glasses sat on her nose. Terrible eyesight and a less-than-perfect smile. Flaws no Asgardian noblewoman would have, but two of the things he liked most about her.

Her lowlights were a happy shade of guile-free purple and he set his chin on the top of her head, wondering what he would not do for this woman, what part of himself he wouldn't mortgage off on her behalf? It was maddening, this feeling and he nearly spoke the words right then and there, in the hope that in speaking, he would make love a lie and be set free.

But he bit his tongue. What if she didn't feel the same? He'd wait until he knew for certain that she did. There was no rush. She was young. He had plenty of time.

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Darcy didn't think she had ever been happier, snuggled tight against her Mad Science's side, temporary girlfriend to a supervillain. Bic turned and leered at her breasts and Darcy smiled.

She loved...this so much.

And that's why she would do it. She was moving to New York.

## Chapter 32

### CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Making the decision to move to New York with Jane was one thing. *Telling* Jane and Loki was another matter. Technically, giving Jane the thumbs-up should have been easy, except a part of Darcy - a childish part that just wanted to slump down on the floor in a petulant pile and say, "No!" - still chafed at the idea that the relocation oh-so conveniently got her away from Loki.

Loki, on the other hand, had told her to go, right? She almost expected him to react to her proclamation with a shrug and then return to work on that thing -- it resembled a very tiny Death Star -- that was currently occupying most of his non-Darcy time.

Okay, so to be honest, he tolerated a lot of Darcy time. Last night, for example, he set aside his tinkering to give her a lesson in the very rudiments of magic.

"Magic for Dummies," she said.

He smirked. "It's more like explaining quantum physics to squirrel."

She glared at him, but it was half-hearted because Loki was talking to her about magic and how freaking cool was that? And also, even though she had temporarily kicked the matter of moving to New York into a dark, dusty corner of her mind, the knowledge that their time together, here in this house, was short, made every second spent with him precious.

Consequently, she worried that he would take the news poorly. Not just retreat behind the walls of his mental fortress, because he'd never actually left Fort Mischief, but pull up the drawbridge and refuse to let her into his private refuge.

And she also worried that he just wouldn't give a damn.

*Loki's smarts aren't the only thing I'm catching. I've now got a bad case of his crazy brain.* A tiny bead of sweat pooled just below the hollow of her throat and then slid coolly over her skin and between her breasts. Fall was making a chilly overture toward the morning temperature, but Darcy's route this morning, on her bicycle, took on the muscle-burning shortcut to Puente Antiguo, the three miles of asphalt-free road that connected Don Tenorio Road to Route 8.

The unpaved road came in two flavor stripes: two sandy ruts cut by the regular passage of vehicles and a hard, caliche section in the middle. Biking through sand took more muscle, but the caliche's uneven hardpan surface made for a brain-scrambling ride, so she opted for the harder workout. Behind her, the black SUV rumbled, kicking up a cloud of dust, and she hoped it would subside before she turned and made the trip back.

An hour and a half later, back home, she braked the bike by the road and flipped the mailbox open, pulling out a small pile of mail. The black SUV pulled up next to her and stopped. The passenger window slid down with a hum.

"What kind of mail do Norse gods get?" said the guard, a thin-faced blond in his twenties whose hairline had decided to get a head start on receding. He must not have gotten the memo yet that Darcy was enemy by association, since his smile was friendly.

Darcy grinned and held up a blue and white envelope for him to see. "Credit card offers. Five thousand dollar credit limit and twelve months no interest on balance transfers." She was serious.

This envelope was addressed to "T. Odinson" and amusingly, was for a card that rewarded the user with frequent flier miles. A couple months ago Jane had ordered *Sports Illustrated* magazine in Thor's name, and since then he'd been deluged with credit card offers.

The guard laughed. "It's good to be a god."

"And an Avenger," Darcy said, because it didn't hurt to remind people that one of the immortals living at 15 Don Tenorio Road was a bona fide superhero. She waved goodbye and headed for house. Besides the credit card industry's attempt to ensnare a thunder god, the pile included actual credit card bills for her and Jane, a scientific journal for Jane, and yellow, padded envelope addressed to "L. Smith."

Darcy felt up the envelope, and then shook it, but couldn't catch a clue as to its contents. Shaking her head, she glanced back at the street, mind already wandering to other things, like the fact that her new boots should be arriving soon. Loki, after all, was always going to be Loki.

Her vision swam, the desert landscape and black asphalt road turning watery, like looking through a window during a hard rainstorm. The phenomena was concentrated by the road, near the eastern boundary between their property and their neighbor, Carlos's. Staggering a little, dizzyed, she dropped some of the mail, her other hand leaning hard on the bike's handle bars. Within seconds her vision cleared. She stared out across their property, toward the black snake of Carlos's tire wall, his house trailer and the terra cotta tiled roof of the Richards's house beyond, the details once again sharp through her glasses. *The hell?*

She bent and picked the envelopes out of the sand, thinking that she really needed to get more sleep. All sex and no sleep made Darcy a hallucinating girl. Maybe a nice long nap this afternoon.

"It's way too early in the day for you two to be that cute," said Darcy. Thor and Jane sat on the loveseat, both in scruffy clothes, snuggled tight and reading one of Darcy's magazines. Even disheveled, they were both beautiful and if the scene were stripped of color, they would look like an artful black-and-white magazine ad.

Leaving the two their mail, she wandered down the hallway to Loki's room. His door was shut, but feeling adventurous, she opened the door and entered without knocking. She was primed for some verbal fencing, but her opponent was asleep, his little invention held loosely in one hand. While she had been gone, he'd dressed in Asgard-lite. The room smelled like Thanksgiving pie, so he must have doing some serious magic and worn himself out. Gently taking the thing from him, she set it on the nightstand along with the envelope.

It was a mistake, stopping and watching him sleep. Smart Darcy would have turned and walked immediately away, but blame it on the fact that she hadn't had breakfast yet; blame it on his supernatural charisma; fuck, blame it on the bossa nova, whatever the hell that meant, but she stopped by the bed, captivated.

In her bedroom, the morning sun turned everything buttery gold. But across the hall, in this room, what little illumination came through the window was on the cooler side of the spectrum. Gazing down at him like this, she imagined him back in Asgard, a black-and-white figure cast in green and blue tones, amid a sea of too-golden, Thor clones. (Because she wasn't that great with imagery, all the women looked a lot like Thor, in gowns and not as bearded - pretty much the proverbial singing fat lady in a Viking helm.)

How could anyone have ever believed he was Thor's biological brother? The Aesir must be the kind of gullible that would believe that a lost king of Nigeria, eager to give away a million dollars, was contacting them through email.

And Loki? Super smart, intuitive Loki? Why had he believed? Wishful thinking?

*No, she thought, he's always known. But he ignored the suspicions the same way she locked up all the bullshit she couldn't handle. But you can't really hide crap like that, it sits in the vault, like radioactive waste, slowly eating its way out, until one day...*

She backed away, the back of her thighs hitting the other bed, and then worked her way clumsily toward the door.

*Until...one day you come fucking unglued and commit atrocities that can't ever be made right; shatter completely into microscopic shards, too brittle to withstand being put back together; right becomes wrong, wrong right; and the person that you were is just a shadow, like the ghostly silhouettes of people on walls at Hiroshima.*

Her spine collided with the door frame and she winced, out of habit, not really feeling pain. Her eyes stayed on the man sleeping peacefully on the bed. Is that what he was? A man? This ancient thing, this storybook character brought to life?

She didn't pity Loki. She didn't think anything he had done was justified. But she understood how a single event after a lifetime of feeling irrelevant could crush what little sense of self was left. The muscles in her calves ached from both the long bike ride and the need to climb into the bed and wrap herself around him. Reaching behind her, she found the molding of the door frame and held on, anchoring herself there.

The thumb on his hand that had held the device twitched. Her breath stopped, and she froze, half-afraid that he'd wake and find her like this, watching him and "bleeding melancholy" again. She also wished he would wake, so she could go to him and touch him, make contact with all the weird little bits that she found sexy -- the place where his hand met his wrist, the tip of his thumb, the spot between his eyebrows that made two deep clefts when he was annoyed or angry.

The wooden frame bit into her hands as she clenched her fingers. Loki. Liar. Agent of chaos. Killer. The man she lo--

*No!* She shook her head, clearing away the thought, and let go of the doorframe.

Loki, immortal, forever, *undying* Loki.

And here she was, dying a little every day. Even if there was anything decent left in him and he decided to stay with her, she would leave him, someday. Forever. She backed into the hallway, nodding to herself. It was better this way. Like pulling a bandage off a stretch of hairy skin; make it quick; brief pain, then over.

Her thoughts made her limbs feel heavy and she set her glasses and cell phone slowly on her desk, and then mechanically opened a dresser drawer, reaching for a clean bra and pair of panties, in preparation for a shower.

The house made a sudden sigh as if hit by a gust of wind. Darcy paused, her hand on a pretty blue bra. She sniffed. Was it her imagination or did she get a faint whiff of mint? The little hairs on her arm stood up straight, goosebumps raising on her skin.

Poking her head out of her doorway, she saw the front door standing open. "Guys?" No one answered and she started down the hall, walking, then running. The electric tingle of magic breezed over her face and a glance at the loveseat showed no Thor or Jane.

"Jane?" a voice said from outside, the tone deep, but confused, almost too-subdued. Then the

smooth tones of another male voice. The quiet that followed only lasted a beat or two, but felt longer. Darcy stopped, unsure what to do next.

"No!" This time the voice was stronger, more like it should sound. Confused, Darcy's gaze swept the living room, stopping for a second on the tiny, dark stains where Loki had bled on the carpet months ago. Outside the voices picked up the angry growl of an argument. The crackle of magic, strange magic hurrying up and down her body, shook her from her confusion and she darted out the door.

Halting on the porch, she lifted her hand, shielding her eyes from the morning sun that seemed to be residing near the end of the driveway. Squinting, and cursing the glasses that sat, useless, on her desk, and her stupid refusal to deal with contact lenses, she stumbled blindly down the stairs toward the light. *Because when a small supernova opens up in your driveway, what else do you do?*

The light dimmed by the time she had moved past the vehicles and then it fell away to reveal Thor. He stood amid a swirling cloud of tan sand, still wearing jeans, hiking boots and a T-shirt, but with his blond hair gleaming in the sun and Mjölfnir in his hand. A stupid thought, relief that however the weapon had found its way to his hand, it hadn't ripped a hole in the side of the house, scurried through her head.

"Thor?" she said, jogging up to him. "What's--"

"He has Jane," he answered, intense gaze on the road, looking east. His tall, muscled body exuded tightly reined in frustration. "He said not to follow, but--"

"Who said?" Darcy interrupted. "And Jane...?" Her head whipped back and forth, searching, even though it was totally obvious her friend wasn't there.

Thor rounded on her, his immense presence pushing her back a step although he didn't touch her. "Jane said she saw a coyote attacking the cat and she ran out the door." Beneath the thunderous rage, Darcy saw distress in his deep blue eyes. Without thinking she took another look around, searching for Inkblot.

"It was a trick, foul, cowardly magic," he spat.

Baffled, Darcy glanced back at the house, almost expecting Loki to be sneering at his brother from the front door. "I don't--"

"The villain, the one who has bedeviled Loki's steps, our steps, slaying your friends," Thor's attention had turned eastward again, "has taken Jane."

"Where? Why?"

Thor's thoughts were clearly starting to move away from her, every inch of him vibrating with the anticipation of battle. "The structure," he said absently, "burnt beyond use, down the road..."

"The barn? The one that someone fixed?"

Lifting Mjölfnir, he took two long strides away from her, the hammer spinning once, twice, and then whirling. "I must go. Jane..."

"But--"

The small hurricane generated by Mjölfnir ate her protest and she staggered backward, arm flung over her face to ward off the biting sand. In seconds, Thor was a human-shaped form moving

across the sun heading to the east. She made the mistake of taking in a breath and gulped sand into her lungs.

"But...", she said futilely, between coughing up dust, "What about Loki?"

*Loki!*

She turned and ran toward the house.



## Chapter 33

### CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Darcy paused in the home's doorway, her eyes skyward; hoping. But all she saw was vivid blue, the sky burned clear of clouds by a weakened, but still energetic fall sun.

He'd be back, right? But in the meantime, she had to do something to shorten the distance between the two siblings.

She plunged into the house and toward Loki's room. He still slept peacefully, but that only fueled her sense of foreboding. Bedsprings squeaked as she pounced on him. She grabbed his shoulders and shook. "Wake-up-wakeup-wakeup-wakeup-WAKE-UP!"

Already a little panicked, she forgot that a startled Loki was a vicious Loki, the reminder coming as two emerald eyes beaming rage, and hands around her neck.

"No...strangling...adorable messenger," she rasped, now pinned underneath him. Realizing his mistake, he immediately released her.

"What--?"

"How far can you teleport?"

"Tele--?" He cocked his head, quizzical. "Ah," he said, understanding, then bitterness moving over his lean face. "Not far."

Hands on his shoulders, she shoved, squirming out from under him and scrambling off the bed. "Let's go!"

He sat up, feet on the floor, rubbing the back of his head and smirking at her. "What crisis looms now? Has Thor attempted more home repairs?"

Not even bothering to be gentle -- because, hello, immortal -- Darcy got his arm in a two-handed death grip and yanked mercilessly. "Please! For once in your long, stubborn life, just cooperate."

His demeanor followed the usual course of haughty arrogance shifting to dark humor, but he rose and started to follow her. A step beyond the bedroom door, he stopped, his expression turning inward, eyes slightly crossed. "Thor?" he asked.

*Oh, shit.* "I'll take you to him, but we have to hurry."

"Take me...?" Beneath Darcy's fingers, his flesh undulated, a deep shift in the current of magic and blood. His green eyes grew wide and he stretched his other arm out, hand on the wall. "Where?"

"Just down the road." Struggling to hold back bubbling, blathering panic, she braced her heels into the carpet and pulled, the effect like trying to uproot a tree. In her hand, the skin, muscle and bones of his hand rippled. Glacial waves of fear raced up her spine.

"Thor left me," he said tonelessly, but his face held open surprise at being abandoned by his normally devoted sibling.

"Not intentionally. Move!" Something strange was going on with him, energy pulsing from his hand into hers, his touch making her stomach churn. Going with another tactic, she said, "Thor

needs your help."

Scorn where Thor was concerned was such a habit, that he went there first, lip curling derisively before he shivered, the clicking of his chattering teeth loud and clear. He relented, allowing Darcy to pull him down the hall, one hand still on the wall. "What has happened?"

"I'll tell you in the car." She let go of his hand and looped her arm around his waist as they reached the end of the hall. Even through layers of heavy embroidered cloth and swaths of leather, the effects of his separation from Thor were growing in strength, spikes of electric energy shocking the length of her arm and up her side where they touched. The closer they got to the front door, the stronger the power, the hotter the sparks burning her skin.

When they reached the door, his weight began to press down on her. She fumbled with the handle, hands already slippery with nervous sweat. After several tries, the latch clicked. She yanked the door open only to have it stop when it hit her foot. She moved her foot, which was difficult because of the tall and rapidly weakening man who leaned on her side. Together they shuffled out the doorway.

Darcy stopped, patting the pockets in her shorts. "Oh, shit," she wheezed, already winded from holding up his weight. "Can you lean, here?" She gestured at the side of the house. Without a word, his face white as a sheet, even in the sunlight, he slumped against the home's aluminum siding.

Her car keys were hanging where they belonged on the hook by the door. Taking that as a good sign, she grabbed them and raced back outside. *Please be back*, she prayed to a certain thunderous deity, but all she found outside was a raven-haired trickster who panted in pain, his long legs quaking even though he still leaned against the house. She wriggled an arm between him and the wall and urged him toward the steps.

"Only have to get to my car." She didn't know if she reassured him or herself. Hope lifted her spirits as he took a small step. Without much support, he took two more solid steps forward.

And hope crashed, along with him as he fell in a bone-crunching series of thuds, knees first, then the rest of him, onto the porch's wooden planks.

Dragged partially by him, she dropped as fast as Loki had. He lay on his side, and she crouched by him, one hand on his face. The skin beneath her palm was icy. "Loki, get up, please."

His eyes locked with hers and then rolled back, flashing dreadful white. Under her hand, the muscles in his jaw bulged as he clenched his teeth, a low, animal groan coming from deep in his chest. A little flicker of gray caught her eye and Darcy darted a brief glance, finding Bic running in a tiny frantic circle nearby.

Loki's shoulders twitched in a spastic shrug, the motion pushing him onto his back. "Loki," she cried, but he was obviously beyond hearing. The spasms began to move up his long body in herky-jerky waves. His head and heels hit wood with horrific, angry thuds. Under the assault of the seizure, the decking creaked and cracks appeared in the flaking painted surface.

"No," she murmured, weak and mournful. She fell back onto her ass, just inches from the edge of the stairs. *Get it together*, a brave Darcy demanded, but the sight of her dream coming to life robbed her of reason. She was a mindless doll made of fear. "No, no, no, no, no." Cutting off her chant, she shoved a fist to her mouth, teeth biting knuckles, the iron taste of her own blood proving this wasn't a dream.

The angry, irregular drum of his body impacting the porch vibrated through her body and she slapped her hands over her ears. His head whipped back and forth, tendons on his neck visible and tight like cords. "Thor," she whispered, "help." Resisting the urge to search the sky again, because she couldn't handle the disappointment, she gulped in mouthfuls of air, drowning in a sense of helplessness.

The agonized wrenching of muscles across his body went on interminably and Darcy watched, desperate to look away from the horrific undoing of her friend, and locked on the sight by a conviction that she had no choice but to bear witness. Digging her heels into the wood that shook under the assault of the seizure, she pressed her back against the porch's upright rail. A sharp corner of the rail jabbed her spine in time with quaking of the porch, but she was oblivious to the new bruises, the horror of what was happening enveloped her. Without the surreal buffer of nightmare, Loki's misery took on a life of its own, turning her feelings for him into barbed wire that bound her to his suffering.

The seizure's bone breaking movements slowed and Darcy held her breath, hoping. When he finally stilled, his eyes cleared and he turned, meeting her eyes. Darcy's heart almost stopped as she waited, expecting the dead, glazed expression to come next. She stared at him in the blessed, still silence, feeling as wrung out as he looked.

"Darcy?"

*Shake it off.* Finally responding to the better part of herself, she rocked forward onto her feet and crawled over to him. "Oh, hell no. You are not leaving me like this." His lips were bloody where he'd bitten them, but she kissed him anyway. "This is how it plays out: You break the mojo handcuffs between you and Thor, pack up glorious purposes and whisk off to some other universe to make mischief. *That's* how you leave me."

"I am not--"

"Get up!" Once again wrapping her hands about his arm, she tugged. She almost sobbed with relief when he sat up and struggled to his feet, his hands rough and bruising on her shoulders and arms, but he was moving, alive.

With her arm around his waist, she felt the wrongness about him, his essence coming apart like a sugar cube in hot coffee. But he was walking down the stairs, leaning on her and the rails - more on the rails, because they were creaking under the force of immortal weight and muscle.

*Aesir strength. Or frost giant. Whatever. He's still strong. He'll be okay.*

Just a few steps away, her little blue Honda shone dully under a thin veneer of dust. At the bottom of the steps, Loki paused and she pushed him on, thinking another seizure was about to happen. The reason for the hesitation, the shifting of his weight from the stairs to her, fell on her, and her calf and thigh muscles ached in protest. This so wasn't a job for a mortal, particularly a mortal woman. Where the hell was Thor? He should have realized his mistake by now.

She assumed that even in his current state Loki wasn't dropping the full extent of his weight on her, because if he did, she'd collapse. But as it were, those few steps felt like miles, her muscles sobbed in pain, threatening mutiny under the dying demi-god.

*Not dying. Strong. Invulnerable. Hulk's squeaky toy. He'll be fine .*

Her hand shaking from exertion, she tugged at the passenger door handle and it opened -- car theft was virtually unknown in Puente Antiguo and she often forgot to lock the doors. "Get in, Miss

Daisy."

He collapsed in messy sprawl on the seat, head leaned back on the headrest, hands in white-knuckled fists. His eyes were clenched shut and a network of lines etched by pain radiated from them and over his pale skin. "Legs too," she said, push-pulling at his right leg that hadn't made it into the car. He shivered, teeth chattering again and went rigid. Darcy despaired, thinking another seizure was on the way. A petty and small voice wailed in her head, *I can't do this, can't handle this. Why Me?* She shook it off with dark humor. *When Thor gets back, he will pay. I don't know how -- hot peppers in his Pop-Tarts -- but there will be pain.*

The tension eased from Loki's thin, embattled frame. With a moan, he pulled his leg into the car. She eyed the seatbelt, but blew it off; a car wreck was the least of his problems. She shut the door and ran to the driver's side.

The reliable Japanese engine started right up. She blew out a sigh of gratitude that the vehicle hadn't decided to be a trope, the car that wouldn't start in the face of a crisis. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Loki squirm in agony, and then slump against the door, face against the glass. Turning, she saw his bloodied mouth stain the glass crimson. He gasped like a fish out of water.

Her hand on the gear shifter twitched. She wanted to touch him, free him from the pain. She also wanted to do something unspeakably bloody to Odin. Instead, she shoved the knob right and down into reverse and worked the gas and clutch, sending the little car ripping backward in a spray of gravel. The vehicle shimmied a bit when she turned the wheel and hit the brake. With several quick movements of the gear shift, she had the car accelerating down the narrow road.

"We'll be there soon." Where ever *there* was. What if Thor had gone somewhere else? Maybe that explained why he hadn't returned yet.

"Well," he said, between rasping breaths, "you've always wanted a d-dem-demonstration of the spell's effects."

Risking a glance at him, a bright shard of guilt stabbed her in the gut. "That was before I got attached to...certain parts of you."

For a moment, he seemed to smile. "Darcy, you should know--" His words were cut off by an long, undulating moan of pain and he folded in on himself, forehead hitting the dash so hard Darcy was surprised the air bag didn't emerge.

"Loki." She spoke his name like a promise. "We'll be there soon." Her right foot drove the gas pedal down. The car's little engine roared and hurled them down the road at several times the speed limit.

Around them familiar scenery whizzed by in a blur. The car's body vibrated from the exertions of the engine's overtaxed pistons as they churned in four cylinders. It was a sturdy little car, but not made for an autobahn or ripping up a narrow country road at nearly 90 mph.

She gripped the steering wheel like a lifeline, turning all her focus on the road. The posted speed limit was thirty and even that was probably too fast for a road where kids sometimes played (and science assistants jogged or rode a bike), but Loki's torment encompassed the little car. Gasps of pain that grew to moans, then tortuous cries; the smell of charred cinnamon and something metallic--oh, fuck, blood--swelled in air. His misery came in waves, with short reprieves between where his breathing, wet and asthmatic, rose over the struggle of the car's engine.

The wheels hit a small pothole and he cried out, the sound sending a fiery empathetic pain through

her. They whizzed past one intersection, then another. Fortunately, at this hour everyone was at work or school and the road was clear. She hoped that this wouldn't be the one day a bored Sheriff's deputy decided to cruise down the road, because she wasn't about to stop until she got to her destination. And then, what would she say to a pissed-off cop? "Sorry. My immortal boyfriend -- you might recognize him; Loki? The pretty boy who rearranged Manhattan? -- is being ripped apart by his father's spell."

Only one car was on the road, a blue and white truck heading the opposite direction. The driver blew his horn angrily at her. The sound barely registered on Darcy and she drilled harder on the gas pedal, begging for more speed. Beside her, she heard three hard thunks, like something hitting the window glass, and then a distinct crack.

Ignoring that noise too, she concentrated on driving at the insane speed. Ahead the dark smear of burned sagebrush and blackened buildings stood out on the desert landscape, stark against the green beginnings of opportunistic weeds and wildflowers that were popping up at the recent rains.

She saw no cars in the vicinity, not on the road or around the barn. Easing back on the gas, she grasped the gear shifter and prepared to slow down and turn off the road. The car was moving too fast when it zipped onto the rutted remains of a gravel driveway and it fishtailed when she hit the brakes too hard.

Her stomach lurching as if she were on a out-of-control carnival ride, Darcy wrenched the steering wheel, making the slide worse. For a second, it felt like they were going to smash sideways into the building, the blackened side looming huge in her sight. But then the tires found purchase and the vehicle straightened.

Braking, easier this time, she turned to Loki. He sat upright in the seat, staring ahead, swaying slightly with the car's motion. The bright, manic energy from her nightmares shone in his eyes.

"Loki." She hit the brake and threw the car into neutral. The gears ground angrily as in her panic, she got the clutch timing wrong. A second later, the engine stopped abruptly, when her foot left the gas pedal. "Loki, stay with me." She popped her seatbelt and scrambled across the front seat. Her legs hit the gear shift and car's center consol, but she bit back an "Ow" and put her hands on his face, staring into his eyes.

He hadn't looked this bad when he first arrived in Puente Antiguo. Of course, when SHIELD dumped him and Thor on Jane and Darcy's doorstep, the not-brothers had been on Midgard for a few weeks. SHIELD hadn't provided Loki any medical care, but Thor had washed some of the blood off his face.

Blood ran in red rivers from several cuts on his face, most on his right. Darcy shifted her hands, feeling the gritty bite of something in one wound on his cheek. A breeze, thick with the scent of charcoal and freshly cut wood, moved over her face and she turned, finding the reason.

In his torment, he had cracked the window. Little shards of glass twinkled diamond-like on the bottom of the window, along the armrest and on the seat. More blood splattered the seat, door and dashboard like a Jackson Pollack painting. With a cool detachment that amazed her, she neatly plucked the small shard of glass from his cheek and flicked it away.

"Loki, look at me." His injuries made no sense. Though it felt soft and human, his skin was tougher than elephant hide; a little glass shouldn't do this; a few bumps shouldn't leave vivid purpling bruises.

Her shoulders sagged, burdened by the immense dread that bore down on her. His body, though

incredibly strong, was still just flesh. It was the fusion of spirit and magic that made him Loki, immortal, unknowable, powerful, and that was coming apart before her eyes.

"Loki, don't do this." Shifting her weight, she twisted, pulled open the little storage bin in the center console, and yanked out a tissue. Ineffectually, she dabbed at the worst gash - one that sliced across his right eyebrow and up his forehead - mopping blood out of his eye. That not working, she grabbed another, balled it up, and pressed it against the wound. Glancing at the discarded tissue on the driver's seat, she saw that the blood had a sort of purple, nearly blue tinge to it. So did the splatters and spots on the car and now, on her hands.

Loki, however, still looked like the Aesir version of himself. Beneath her thighs, where she straddled him, his leg muscles rippled and twitched. His eyes, wide open, stared at some distant place, beyond where she could ever go. Someone sobbed and she realized it was her. "Come back to me," she said, "please."

The crazy light in his eyes dimmed and lucidity flooded his expression. He blinked, and met her eyes. "Thor," he said, his voice rough as gravel, all traces of the usual elegant smoothness gone. "He meant Thor. 'They think it's him. They are wrong.' Not *me*. Thor."

"Thor? I don't understand."

"I was," he lifted a trembling hand to her face, "wrong."

"You?" She tried to snort, but all that came out was a sobbing snuffle. "Never wrong. 'Misguided.'"

He flinched, muscles jerking along his jaw and neck. His mouth opened and he began breathing in rapid, shallow, gasps. On her face, his thumb rubbed at a tear under her eye. "Still unnerving," he said weakly.

His gaze traveled up over her face and toward her hair. A strange expression -- grief, maybe -- flickered on his face, and then he shivered, his hurried breaths slowing. His eyelids dropped till there was just a strip of green to be seen.

The stillness stunned her into temporary shock. "Loki," she whispered. She said his name several more times, but he didn't respond.

The terror that gripped her wasn't like anything she'd felt before. It was nothing like the fear she felt on the night when the sky came alive with a brilliant vortex that dumped a thunder god in front of the vehicle she was driving. This feeling was composed of layers and layers of denial, that just barely held back the truth that what was happening was completely and utterly real.

"Loki, come on, this isn't funny." She dropped the blood-soaked tissue and wrapped her fingers around the thick cloth at his shoulders. "Open your eyes, dammit!" When she shook him, the man in the Asgard-lite clothing moved from her actions, not his, and that was all wrong. Because Loki was made of might and magic and it took more than Darcy to shift him.

"Loki, don't do this to me. You can't do this to me!" The pitch of her voice rose. "Come back. You have to. I'll call you... 'Your Majesty' or 'Prince Loki' or 'King Loki.' I'll bow and curtsy. Whatever." She shook him angrily, hating the way his body moved limply. "Mad Science, please. Don't go." With the last plea, her voice cracked and squeaked and she slumped forward, her face buried in the hollow where his neck met his body. Warm skin touched hers, and under the reek of blood and fried magic, he still smelled like Loki.

The breeze toyed with her hair, sending a little strand dancing over her ear. "No, no, no, no," she

muttered, trying to find power in the stupid litany.

*Thor. Find Thor.* She yanked the door handle, climbed quickly but carefully off him and started toward the barn. Something stung on her knees. Glancing down, she saw bits of glass embedded in her skin. She brushed them off, wincing at the pain and ran to the small doorway on the side of the barn.

Pale, unpainted, new wood framed the doorway, but there was no actual door. The darkness beyond was complete, too dark for a building that outwardly was made of cracks and gaps. "Thor!" she yelled, her voice thin and cracking with grief. "Thor, it's Loki. The spell, it's..." *Killed him. No.* "Killing him. Where are you?"

She stepped forward with her right foot and the impossible darkness swept over her face, flowing past the tip of her nose and over her cheeks, chin and forehead like icy black water. For a split second it felt as though the dark nothingness would reject her and then it relaxed and sucked her forward.

Before she could stop, her left foot followed the right and she froze, gasping in the watery darkness. Air rushed into her lungs easily despite the weird liquid sensation on her skin.

At that moment, Loki, Thor and Jane slipped from her mind, chased away by the suffocating terror of the complete darkness. Her eyes blinked and squinted, baffled by the total absence of color, because what lay in front of her eyes was beyond black, the emptiness of blindness.

And the darkness blotted out all sense of logic, leaving nothing but panic. Nothing mattered more than getting away from the appalling blackness. Darcy scrambled backward, colliding with solid wall. Somehow, she had gotten turned around. Yeah. That was all. The entrance was just here, behind her, right?

Hands out, searching, she stumble forward in the clotted more-than-darkness, bouncing off the walls like an insect in a bottle. One step, two, three. Left, right, right, left again. Where was the door? Blinded, mindless with terror, she fumbled along what felt like an endless corridor. Her heart pounded so hard it seemed like every drop of blood was being forced into her head.

Then the space before her cleared and she rushed forward, only to smash into another wall. Her hands took the impact, fingers twisting back painfully; she staggered backward.

It didn't seem possible to be more afraid, but panic rose to a mind-numbing level and she turned and ran left, all sense of herself gone. All her thoughts became: *Get away, get away, get away, get away, get away--*

And she burst into the light. Her heart leapt with the relief of escape. She squinted in the blazing light, disoriented. Where? Then her relief began to evaporate in the searing whiteness. Her eyes ached, still dilated from the dark, baffled by the light that wasn't. The blackness has been replaced by its opposite, a brilliance so intense it felt like her eyes had been burned from her skull. She stood, confuse, wondering if she was alive, if this was the white light seen by the dying. The sound of her labored breathing and rush-rush-rush of blood through her veins, however, felt like a very "alive" thing to do.

Was it a weird dream? Maybe she hadn't actually woken up this morning? On her right hand, the index finger throbbed, broken maybe. Her knees still stung where glass shards had cut skin. *Can you feel pain in a dream? In death?*

Her mind was lost in the current of terror, but the word "death" snagged something in the flood, a

name. Loki. Then another: Jane. Then, a third. "Thor," she said aloud.

Fear still owned her, but she took a wobbling step and then another. "Thor." Her voice stronger this time, she called, "Thor, where are you? I need your help. Loki needs you." A tingle, the frisson of a nearby lightning strike - magic - scurried along her skin and she felt the weird tickle of it lifting her hair. She shivered, and something inside her shrugged and somehow shook the sensation off.

And then the light dimmed. Darcy's heart lurched at the thought of the congealed darkness. Her brain-to-eyes connection flailed for several seconds, bewildered by the return of ordinary light.

Ordinary? Not exactly. She stood in a darkened alcove, newly constructed and unfinished, judging by the smell of fresh-cut lumber and the rough, mottled texture of plywood sheathing on the walls. Another doorway opened about five feet before her, highlighted by the distinctive glow of magical light, blue-white and similar to an LED.

"Darcy?"

The voice came from the beyond that doorway. Deep, familiar. The sound of a hero. The key to saving Loki. Though still shaking with the tremors of fear and adrenaline, happiness blaze through her and she darted out the doorway.

Too late she realized her mistake.

She should have called SHIELD right when Thor flew away on Air Mjölnir, but she was too focused on getting Loki back in his brother's proximity. If hauling a crumbling Loki through the house and to the car wasn't a job for a mortal woman, then facing a murderous elf, unarmed and stupid, definitely wasn't. Especially, if he had been able to hold off the Mighty Thor. In retrospect, she realized that she and Thor had made the same mistake--the kind of blunder that Loki sneered at. Plunging into a situation without thinking about the consequences.

With theatrical slowness, the scene revealed itself to her eyes: a small room, fey light that glowed from walls and ceiling; Thor in the center of the room; furious, but held at bay by Jane's horrible situation; the throbbing, writhing, living power that emanated from everywhere in the room.

Her attention, however, flitted over the scene and fell as though weighted in lead, on the person who stood on the far left side of the room. She shook her head in childlike disbelief, wondering once more if this was a bad dream. Because although the face was changed by alien proportions, eyes a little too big, cheekbones too high, but it remained completely, heartbreakingly familiar.

Numb from shock, she managed to speak one word. "You."



## Chapter 34

### CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Darcy's first thought was of her glasses, sitting next to her cell phone and Taser, on her desk at home. Because maybe her shitty eyes were deceiving her. Because maybe she really didn't recognize the person standing about twelve feet away. Maybe her brain, already scrambled from the house of black-and-white horror that she had just stumbled through, had filled in the details with the first available male face that wasn't Thor or Loki.

"Sean?"

"Hi, Darcy." His voice was unmistakable and his tone breezy, with an undertone of smug satisfaction.

Utterly without a response, her capacity for smart-ass commentary flattened by betrayal and shock, she took in the real face of the person she had called friend. Frankly, the elf-look worked for him. At this thought, a wry voice in her head observed that a couple years ago, she would have had a minor freak-out (okay, there might have been screaming) over Sean's transformation to D&D character. But back then she wasn't dating a sometimes deranged Norse god who had a shockingly cute blue side.

With his androgynous, bony features elongated, everything on Sean's face flowed together better. He was prettier and weirdly, almost more human. Except for the pointy ears, that is. Though he had dropped the magical disguise, his clothes were still totally Midgard: jeans, hiking boots, a red T-shirt, and a gray hoodie. Same scruffy brown hair, though his skin tone was actually paler. That reminded her of something, but before she could work out what, Thor turned to her.

"Loki," he said, his blue eyes briefly meeting hers, hitting her with the extent of his concern, before veiling the emotion and turning back toward Jane and Sean. "He is with you?"

"In my car. You--"

"He is well?" Thor interrupted, gaze still on Jane.

"No." She hated admitting it, there in front of Sean, giving the pointy-eared prick what he wanted. But if there was a chance...

"Let me go to him." Thor's voice was strong, almost a command. "You know I will return." He inclined his head toward Jane who stood just a couple steps from Sean's side.

"Of course you will," replied Sean, with a smirk. "I've also got Darcy now. I can string her up just as easily."

"Two hostages, whatever," snapped Darcy, although fear shivered through her legs. "Just let him go, Sean. Please."

"Sure." A smile, falsely benevolent, shone on Sean's face. "Out to Darcy's car, and no farther." One perfect eyebrow arched before he issued a threat in a pleasant tone. "Call for help, do *anything* other than collect your brother, and return here, and Jane dies."

The God of Thunder seethed, quite literally. The pseudo-peppermint of his magic, thinly suppressed lighting, sizzled into Darcy's skin. The muscles in his arm bulged, his knuckles

whitened, obviously missing Mjölnir. The hammer sat, handle pointed skyward, near Sean's feet. Held at bay by the lethal magical binding on Jane, and clearly wracked by guilt and worry for both his brother and girlfriend, Thor scowled a warning at Sean, then turned on a heel and marched toward the doorway.

As he passed her, he touched Darcy briefly on the shoulder. "It will all be well."

Darcy started to speak, to warn him about the blinding light and dark in the hallway beyond. Instead one word came from her mouth. "Hurry." Thor moved through the doorway, disappearing around the corner. His heavy footfalls clomped on the cracked concrete floor and then died abruptly.

Trying to take comfort in the brothers' pending reunion - Loki would wake up, then he and Thor would make Sean regret ever coming to Midgard and doing anything more than playing elf to Santa at a mall - Darcy started slowly toward Jane. Her legs and shoulders already were stiffening with aches from power lifting Loki, and her knees itch-burned from the glass cuts.

"That's close enough," said Sean.

"Wh-what? You're afraid of me?" Darcy stopped and gave him her trademark, chin up, You Don't Scare Me look. It might have been more impressive if her legs weren't trembling like Jello.

"Not particularly. But things do have a tendency to explode in your proximity." He shrugged, breathtaking blue eyes focused on her. "And, you've been spending a lot of time with a guy known for mischief."

"What now? You're going to do that to me?" She pointed at Jane. *That*, at first glance didn't appear to be much. In fact, Jane stood at Sean's side, on her own two feet, brown eyes wide and posture rigid, but otherwise looking like herself, wearing gray yoga pants, black ballet flats, and a T-shirt that read, "Never Trust an Atom, They Make Everything Up." The first indication that something was terribly wrong was a pair of thin cuts, hardly more than scratches, cut with scalpel-like precision on either side of her neck.

The cause was a razor thin band of the weird alternating light and darkness that circled and radiated out from her neck for approximately six inches, sort of like the rings of Saturn. More of the spectral, circular blades shadowed Jane's wrists and mid-thighs. Darcy's knowledge of anatomy was as limited, but she knew the magical razors lay over major bleed-out points.

"I'll only do that," Sean tilted his head at Jane, "if you make it necessary."

"Maybe me and my Taser will make it necessary." Her eyes met Jane's and a tiny spark of inspiration flickered in a dark, fear-thickened section of her brain. Jane, knowing her too well, shook her head slightly.

Sean let a small huff of a laugh. "You don't have your Taser."

"Maybe I do," Darcy persisted. "Let Jane go. Loki doesn't give a shit about her. If you want to piss him off, it's me you want."

"Darcy, no," whispered Jane.

"Seriously, Darcy? You think Loki cared about you?" Sean's mouth straightened in a sad line that nearly seemed genuine. "You're mortal. You're just a convenient spot to hit, nothing else. If he had gotten out of here, he would have left you and gone back to chasing the most beautiful immortal tail in the realms."

"You're right. For now, I'm his easy fuck," she responded, using the crudity to show that Sean's words didn't hurt, because, after all, she'd thought the same thing herself many times. "*His*. And princes of Asgard don't like to share."

Sean's only response was a bored shrug, his gaze going to the doorway. Darcy's eyes also went that way, anticipation tightening her breathing. When nothing stirred in the doorway, she turned, taking in the room.

Immediately behind Sean, next to the wall, stood a cylindrical object, about the circumference of a standard trash can, but only about two feet tall. Framed like a barrel out of wood, stripes of thinner wood glowed with a yellow light in between the thicker vertical staves. A second shining barrel thing sat on the opposite side of the room. The walls and ceilings were covered in undulating lines, resembling tribal tattoos, but drawn in the horrible too-black and un-light. Eight small magical globes, arranged in a rough octagonal pattern, were set in the ceiling like inset electrical lights.

"What with the lights?" asked Darcy. "Elfin Hanukah?"

"Loki thought you were smart," replied Sean. "Figure it out."

Eager to see Thor return with Loki, it was difficult to keep her eyes from the doorway, but she raked the room with another hard look. She saw nothing new, but could feel the throb of energy in the small space. The energy moved back and forth between the barrel things. It felt like was being trapped inside a kid's anticipation for Christmas, buzzing with barely contained excitement and energy. Power. The term "potential energy" came to mind.

"It's a battery," said Darcy. Jane gave her a very timid nod. "For what?"

Sean's blue eyes twinkled with dark amusement and turned toward the door. Just as abruptly as they had stopped moments before, heavy footfalls came again from the darkness. Seconds later, Thor strode through the doorway and past her. The blond immortal stopped about six feet in front of Sean, in the place where he had stood before. Darcy swallowed, suddenly lightheaded, overcome by a dark déjà vu.

Silent, Thor faced Sean, a turbulent sea of emotion moving through his blue eyes. Darcy's eyes, however, were glued on the still form of Loki in his brother's arms. The tableau was strikingly similar to the day when she first met Loki - if exchanging dirty looks could be called "meeting." He hung in his brother's arms, pale, bloodied, unconscious.

"Loki?" She said his name out loud before she could stop herself. *He's okay. Just a little scuffed, that's all.*

"Is this what you wanted?" asked Thor. The words were spoken softly, yet reverberated around the room. "All this," he jerked his chin, indicating Jane, the room and the building, "to see the end of him?"

*End?*

The triumph on his face radiating a cold beauty, Sean smiled a closed-mouth smile, his focus tight on Thor's face, eyes glittering with a gleeful intensity. He seemed to be drinking in Thor's misery. "Not all I want, but one of the best parts," he answered.

"What was his transgression against you?" asked Thor.

"I had no quarrel with Prince Loki."

That answer drew in a deep chasm of silence, as Jane, Darcy and Thor, but especially Thor, tried to process Sean's confusing response. "Then...why?" asked Thor, his normally powerful voice weakened by grief.

The question triggered a wide shift in Sean's demeanor, giddy mirth giving way to black rage. He met Thor's stare. "*You* took everything," the words spoken with barely contained fury, and the deep sonic undertone of something not-human, "from me. Everything."

He stared pointedly at Loki's motionless body. "And now, I've taken the thing that mattered most to you." Although he was considerably shorter than Thor and out-muscled, he emanated raw power. All the cute boy vulnerability that Darcy had found attractive was gone. Even in his Midgard clothing, Sean was creature of terrible pale beauty. "He's betrayed you, tried to kill you, and you still go against your father's commands for his sake."

"He is my brother," said Thor.

A sneered crept onto Sean's hate-filled visage. "Not according to him." He chuckled. "Maybe now you can have him stuffed and haul his well-behaved corpse around with you."

"Your cruelty is senseless and it wounds not only me, but Darcy, the one you've called friend," said Thor. "What is it I took from you?"

Sean took a step backward, though it obviously wasn't in fear. He shook his head, and scoured Thor with a look of utter disgust. "My family. My people. The woman I loved. What part of 'everything' don't you understand?"

Thor's head cocked slightly to the side. "I...know you not."

"Of course you don't. That's the key definition of collateral damage, isn't it? It's warfare for 'shit happens.'"

Seeing Thor struggle with the meaning of Sean's words, Darcy felt an urge to speak, explain "shit happens" and whatever other Midgard colloquialism came from Sean. She scowled at Sean, hating him for making Loki suffer, threatening Jane's life, and now, for tormenting poor Thor.

She stood, knees wobbling, a part of her wanting to go to Thor's side. Except she didn't want to go near Loki, didn't want to feel the heat leaving her lover's skin. He was fine. It was all just a trick, because --hello!--Loki. And Thor seemed fooled because either he was in on the deception or, well, he never was much good at seeing through Loki's tricks.

She watched Loki's chest, searching for movement, not knowing if it was really possible to see him breathing under his layers of clothing. He could fake that as well anyway.

But a hollowness ate at her, the lack of her sense of him. Because, she realized, for some time now, she possessed an awareness of him. When did it happen? After they'd had sex? No, earlier. Maybe a few months ago, or maybe when he first arrived in Puente Antiguo?

Now, however, she felt nothing from the faded and still man that Thor carried. What did it mean? Was she looking at an illusion? Her mind grasped for any alternative other than the unthinkable.

"You remember, Asgardian," said Sean and his anger was echoed by the room, the throb of power growing in strength, squeezing every cell in Darcy's body. "You bragged about your triumph to Jane and Darcy just a few weeks ago." He dipped his gaze onto Loki, briefly. "Even Loki couldn't stomach your gloating-"

"Whoa," Darcy interrupted. "Thor's story about the dark elves, the village that was harboring some kind of terrorists or something." The various parts of the story and the remainder of the mystery began to shift in her head, her brain trying to fit one puzzle piece to another.

"There were no terrorists!" The familiar blue of Sean's eyes blazed at Darcy, and despite her best efforts otherwise, she took a step back.

"You lie!" snapped Thor.

"No, you lied! You and Odin." He took a step closer to Thor. "We were nothing more than farmers and hunters. Of no interest to anyone, except for one thing. And what was that, Thor?" Getting only baffled and angry silence from Thor, Sean continued, "An iron mine on our land, with some of the richest ore in the Nine Realms. For a few centuries Asgard even traded with us. But that wasn't enough. Odin and the rest wanted it for themselves."

"Wh-wait," said Jane, nervously, clearly being careful not to move much. "Elves can't tolerate iron."

"Members of my clan have a slight immunity and we developed a tithe to take care of the effects that immunity didn't work on."

"That's why you can handle being around so much steel and can work in SHIELD's facility," said Darcy. Two puzzle pieces slid closer together in her mind. "Your mom and sister. They are like you, but your brothers, you made them up."

"My brothers are dead, as is my father!" said Sean, and Darcy cringed again from the heat of his rage. "They were slaughtered in the attack. My mother survived, but her mind didn't. And my betrothed died as consequence of her rape at the hands of Thor's comrade."

She remembered his words in the break room days before, how his fiancée had passed away. "R-raped and killed?"

His pain flooded her as he met her gaze. "No." A tiny tremor shook his upper body. "She found a body, my younger brother's, mangled beyond recognition." Something new, guilt, softened his anger. He flicked a glance toward the floor, a shimmer of remorse in his eyes. "My sister and I had gone on a week-long hunting trip. Before I left, I loaned Achlon, my brother, my sword. He planned to take it to dwarven smiths so that they could forge a copy for him.

"When Marsali came across my brother's mutilated body, she saw that sword strapped in a scabbard at his side, and thought I was dead, too. The grief of losing me and the shame of her violation, drove her to suicide."

The images from her nightmare flashed before Darcy's eyes: trudging up a hill against a dark sky to where a lonely tree stood. "She hung herself," she said, hand going to her throat, feeling the rasp of coarse rope against her skin. Sean's eyes locked with hers and for an instant understanding passed between them. "She wouldn't have wanted you to do this."

His face twisted with fury. "YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT SHE WOULD HAVE WANTED!" Power, an actual force, shoved Darcy and she stumbled back, almost losing her footing.

"ENOUGH!" roared Thor. "You quarrel is with me, then. What honor is there in threatening an unarmed mortal woman?"

"No more or less than sneaking up on village at night, and laying waste to everything and everyone."

"We had good reason--"

"You did it for greed and glory, but mostly glory," snarled Sean. "All you do is for *your* glory. Your own glory, and the honor of your high ancestral name."

"Without honor, what are we?" responded Thor, although the slight creases between his brow suggested he knew he was talking himself into a trap.

"We are brothers, fathers, friends," said Sean. "Farmers, blacksmiths, hunters, and craftsmen. We are all the sum of our lives, not just a vague abstraction like honor. What is honor, anyway? Hearing the crowds cheer your name when you return from battle victorious?" Sean's gaze fell on Loki's still form in Thor's arms. "Tell me, Thor, in all the instances that your deeds have been praised, have you ever given any thought to the fallen, the ordinary soldiers who helped you win the day?"

Back straightening, Thor lifted his chin and nodded, pride in his stance. "Asgard's fallen heroes are always given their due respect."

"Define hero," snapped Sean. "If you, one of the Warriors Three, Sif, or a general dies, there would be days of mourning, funereal feasts, and long speeches praising their every action, from birth to death." He shrugged. "But the foot soldier gets, what? A bag of gold paid to his family?"

"No, you are wrong. Even the lowest ranking warrior is honored--"

"With vague toasts around the table at the victory feast," Sean sneered. "And forgotten a few months after."

Thor started to speak, but Sean's voice cut him off. "Whose name is in the history books? The common soldier's or the Mighty Thor's? Who really gets the credit for Asgard's victories?" To this Thor had no answer.

"You get lauded for your bravery, when in comparison to the ordinary foot soldier, you're a coward," said Sean. Thor's eyes blazed at the insult and he clearly held himself back only for Jane's sake. "Compared to a mortal, the ordinary Asgardian soldier seems invulnerable. But unlike Thor, he goes into battle with little more than the armor on his back. He doesn't carry Mjölnir, he can't command the powers of a storm."

"Tell me, Thor, who is the braver?"

Rage still boiling in his powerful frame from the insult, Thor nonetheless deflated somewhat. And underneath layers of fear, pain and despair, a new emotion flared in Darcy's chest, pity. Pity for Thor. That fueled anger which burned through her eyes as a death glare at Sean. It was futile, but it felt good, nonetheless.

"SHIELD will be here soon," said Jane, her soft voice breaking the hard silence. "They know what's going on, thanks to all the bugs in the house." She swallowed and looked pointedly at Loki. "He stopped disabling them a few days ago." A bright note of hope pinged in Darcy's heart.

The edges of Sean's mouth turned up with a condescending smile. He nodded agreeably. "Loki stopped *destroying* the bugs, but Darcy's lizard didn't get the memo."

Thor and Jane both looked at Darcy and she winced, remembering Bic's propensity to hunt and kill the devices, a habit that Darcy had encouraged during their stay underground.

"Your pet went after the bugs with a vengeance this morning," observed Sean. "Guess it was

bored."

"And you, elf," said Thor, "have had your vengeance. If your quarrel lies with me, then the women-"

"Are coming with us," interrupted Sean. He inclined his head to the left and Darcy followed his line of sight to the far wall, to the dark rectangle of another doorway. She hadn't noticed it, confusing it with all the other patterns of hideous more-than-darkness.

"Where?" demanded Thor.

"To pay for what you've done, you and Odin both."

"No," declared Thor.

To this Sean shrugged and cast a sideways look at Jane, who whimpered. The red stripes on her neck lengthened and began to ooze blood. "Seriously, man?" said Sean. "Attitude?" He gestured at Loki. "Put that down. We don't need any dead weight."

"I cannot just leave him, here, in this place."

"You can and you will." Sean pointed at Jane for emphasis. "You'll do whatever I ask. If I ask you to braid your pretty blond hair in pigtails and sing 'I'm a Little Teapot,' you'll ask, 'In what key, sir?'"

His face, nearly as pale as Loki's with fury, Thor bent his knees and eased his brother's motionless body to the ground. Just before he rose again, his gaze met Darcy's. The anguish he bared to her threatened to bring tears to her eyes. Was Thor that good an actor?

Standing, Thor gestured at her. "You do not require Darcy." He glanced down at the man at his feet and back at Darcy. "Her part is done in this."

"No!" said Darcy before common sense could catch up. Everyone's attention settled on her. She blinked, trying to understand her outburst. Her mouth kept going, however. "I'm coming with you - with Jane." Going to whatever hell Sean had planned was the last thing she wanted to do. But for the last few years, she had followed Jane through thick and thin, dull and dangerous. Jane was more than a friend, she was family. As everyone was always so happy to point out, Darcy didn't have much in the way of skills, but there was no way she was abandoning Jane, or Thor, for that matter.

When she turned her determined glare on Sean, she was pleased to see a note of wariness in his eyes, as he passed a brief look down to Loki then back to her, maybe wondering if her agreement was some mischief. Darcy's gaze followed a similar rise and fall, down to her lover and up to Sean.

People no doubt wondered how she could tolerate Loki, much less be his friend. Eyes on Sean's face, his features altered, but still much like the guy she had crushed on, Darcy understood part of her attraction to Loki. She trusted him because she knew exactly what he was. He wasn't a sweet-faced young man who pretended to be her friend, who invited her to his dorm to play video games and repaid her trust with fists and violation. He wasn't a shy accountant who used her to unfold a murderous plan to get revenge on Thor.

Loki was Loki. Conniving, arrogant, and on special occasions--loss of his marbles, etc. --downright murderous. But he didn't bother to downplay his past, or be anything but Loki. And it made him one of the most honest people she knew.

Unable to stop herself, she glanced down at Loki's motionless form, a seed of grief starting to take hold in her chest. She lifted her chin, facing down Sean. "Why kill Max and Andy?" she asked, not expecting an answer.

"It's like the relationship status on Facebook," Sean answered, his face thoughtful, "'It's complicated.'" He grinned darkly at Thor. "But with Loki back in SHIELD's custody, I thought it would be easy to separate the two. I could have arranged for Loki to be in a secure cell, Thor in nearby quarters, free. Then blow up something in the facility and watch while Thor bolted off to be the hero, and forgot all about his brother."

All eyes fell on the lifeless body on the floor, the proof that Sean's alternate plan might have worked.

"Of course, I still would have needed extra leverage," he smirked at Jane, "to get Thor to travel with me." He took a step toward Jane, in the direction of the shadowed door. "We've wasted enough time." Resting his hand lightly on Jane's upper arm, ignoring Jane's nervous flinch, he inclined his head toward the second darkened doorway and gave Thor a slight, sardonic bow. "After you, my lord."

Determination on his face, Thor took two steps forward and Darcy saw the thoughts racing in his head. She sighed, thinking that, unfortunately, the big guy was not a subtle man. Sean saw this too, and noted, snidely, "I can see you anywhere in this building, including the next room, *hee-ro*."

As Thor again started moving, keeping himself angled so that he could keep an eyes on Jane. Sean said to Darcy, "You next."

Darcy met Jane's eyes, saw her fear mirrored in brown eyes and wished she could do or say something reassuring. But she was so hopeless outmatched: she wasn't Natasha or even Pam, the guard at SHIELD. Just nearsighted Darcy, with a big mouth, pretty face and nice tits. No one took her seriously and for good reason. Out-of-character despair slumped her shoulders and she took one step.

She couldn't stop herself from pausing and looking back at Loki's unmoving form on the barn's cracked and blackened concrete floor. His face was turned away from her, but what she could see of his skin had a faint bluish cast, and she felt nothing of him. *Please*, she begged, *Let this be another one of your schemes. I'll be so pissed-off at you for making me feel this way, but I'll forgive you. Because I'm stupid that way. Because, I lo-, because I need you. Please don't be gone.*

Feeling eyes on her, she lifted her gaze to meet Sean's stare. "Hey," he said, and for a split second, she thought a hint of her friend Sean O'Malley, shy accountant, still lived in those cornflower blue eyes. He seemed poised to say something, and then, his expression turned grim. "Move, or Jane bleeds."

Without anything else to do, she began to follow Thor. A second later, with one last furious glare at Sean, Thor stepped through the oily dark of the doorway. Darcy paused one step from the doorway, her body remembering the blackness in the other hallway, cold fear and adrenaline flooding her bloodstream, and making every nerve in her body fire, her teeth chatter.

*For Jane*, she thought. *For Loki*.

Taking a breath like a swimmer diving into icy water, she lifted her foot and plunged forward.



## Chapter 35

### CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

"So we are leaving Midgard, then," stated Thor, as soon as Sean, with Jane at his side, joined him and Darcy the next room. He and Darcy both eyed the structure in the far corner of the room.

Sean, one hand still on Jane's arm, gestured at Thor, and then farther into the large room they had just entered, his meaning, "Move; over there," clear. Being ordered around was a foreign concept to Thor, but the blond prince obeyed, mirroring Sean's pose by taking gentle hold of Darcy's arm and moving her along with him.

"Ow!" Darcy yelped softly. Her hand had bumped up against Thor's side, jarring her sore finger.

"Darcy?" Thor's hand released her. He stopped but she kept moving, approaching the strange structure in the far corner, mesmerized by its familiarity.

"I'm fine," she said distractedly. Right arm bent, hand at her chest to keep her finger from getting struck again, she continued across the room, taking in details of the cavernous space. A half dozen magical globe lights were positioned along the top beam of the barn's peaked roof. They cast feeble light along the center of the room, leaving most of the space in shadow.

Sheets of plywood sheathing, grayish tan in the fey light, lined the lower six feet of the walls. The rest of the blackened walls and ceiling, however, hadn't been repaired. In fact, Darcy could see the gaps between the barn's siding, but no light from outside penetrated the building. She had the impression that the gaps had been chinked with the horrible magical darkness.

Continuing on, she stopped a few feet before the portal, because that's what it was. Just like the spot in Ruth King's barn, sparks, made of all the colors of the rainbow and beyond, dove and rose like swarms of insects, inside and around the structure. Unlike the thing in the Kings' barn, however, this portal had more than magical framing. It made her think of a wooden gazebo, only without a nice set of patio furniture. A deep humming sound came from the structure, generating a uncomfortable sense of pressure in her ears that she couldn't banish with yawning or swallowing.

Forgetting caution, she took another step and touched one of the eight posts that marked its perimeter. The post, amusingly, was the pretty much the standard Southwestern porch post, featuring a carved design meant to look like a thick length of rope. The wood was freshly carved, still smelling wetly of sap. She expected Sean or someone to warn her away, but when no admonishment came, she realized that once again no one took her seriously enough to bother.

Peering farther into the portal, she saw a latticework of oak strips woven between vertical lengths of iron rebar that made up the back wall of the portal. Iron. The tithe thingy that Loki mentioned in Ruth King's barn.

Going deeper into the portal seemed a bad idea, even by Darcy's leap-first-think-later standards, but she gingerly extended her left arm, reaching to the dancing sparks. Thor and Sean's voices murmured in the back of her awareness, but no one said, "Darcy, don't touch!" The tips of her fingers grazed the surface of the magically charged air within the portal and she drew back briefly at the zingy shock. Finding all five digits still intact, she tried again, letting her fingers sink into the flow of magic, the feeling reminiscent of holding a hand out the window of a fast moving car, invisible currents wafting against skin. A memory coiled, rose and dissipated like smoke, not quite tangible, just out of reach. She had encountered this magic before--Sean's magic. On the fake

Asgard rose and somewhere else? Where?

Her thoughts were interrupted by Thor's deep voice as it rose in volume, cutting through the portal's constant hum. "Have you grown weak, elf?" he asked. "You did not need such a device to transport Loki and I to Midgard."

Darcy shifted her attention from the structure to the two men, studying Thor's face, wondering why he trying to provoke Sean.

Sean answered Thor's question without a trace of irritation. "I wasn't transporting mortals." He glanced meaningfully at Jane and Darcy. "Interdimensional travel outside a channel constructed by the Bifrost or a similar structure wrecks havoc on mortal brains. All that infinity turns their brains to Jell-O."

"You don't have to follow his orders, Thor," Darcy said, raising her voice to carry across the room. "He can't kill Jane or me because then he wouldn't have hostages. He's bluffing." Thor eyes narrowed slightly and the fingers on his right hand curled as if holding a hammer's handle.

Unfazed, Sean flicked a glance at Jane. "Killing her would be a last resort, but hurting her? Not so much." Jane flinched, eyes widening and then clenching shut. "I can make her wish she'd never met you."

Her mouth moving in wordless agony, Jane staggered, feet braced far apart. She pressed her palms against her forehead, the magical razors around her wrists hissing as they contacted one another.

Sean waved his fingers lazily. Jane dropped her hands from her head, still gasping, but the pain lifted away. "You should know better than to listen to Darcy," he said to Thor.

"Why's that? Because I'm a silly girl?" asked Darcy, frustrated, helpless. "Been there, heard that, bought the commemorative shot glass. 'Sides, I've been called that by a better man than you."

Sean cocked his head at her. "Loki?"

"No, by Thor." Thor had said it, months before to Jane when he thought Darcy was out of earshot. Darcy hadn't taken it personally, especially since, what he said after--"Loki would not appreciate me saying so, he thinks Darcy is his alone to insult."--distracted her.

Distraction. Thor needed a distraction.

"Your fiancée really wouldn't have wanted this," said Darcy, bracing for Sean's reaction.

*Careful what you wish for.* His gaze snapped, whip fast, on her, blue eyes incongruously hot with anger. "You will not speak of her!"

She'd been through so much scary stuff, it didn't seem possible that she had any left in her body, but adrenaline spiked anyway. Fear racing through her body, she nonetheless also felt rage, remembering the dream, the invasion into her personal mind space. "I will," she said, her voice squeaking with nerves.

"You won't," Sean snarled, advancing on her.

"I will!" She didn't retreat from his approach. She had stood up to Loki; she wasn't about to back down from Sean. "Because I know her. In my nightmare. I was in her fucking mind. Her dead, dying mind, thanks to you." She pointed at him. "If you didn't want me to know her, you shouldn't have shoved her last hours alive into my head!"

Sean stopped, recoiling ever so subtly, his eyes black pupils with a narrow rim of blue. "That wasn't meant to happen." His voice was oddly soft.

"Well, it did."

He broke eye contact, his expression lost. "I don't know how that happened. She moved through me, into you." He met her eyes and she saw longing. "I wanted so much to know her thoughts, to touch her in any way, one last time, but she passed right through me...to you."

With those words, Sean's scary, vengeful madness fell away, and even with pointy ears, he was the person she knew again. Open, vulnerable, heartbroken. Suspended in his pain, all she could say was, "I'm sorry."

When Mjölfnir struck him, she felt a ridiculous twist of guilt, underneath her overwhelming sense of relief. Mjölfnir moved as a flash, too fast for her to see the actual collision. Thrown by Thor, who had lunged forward and to her right, the magical weapon struck Sean's back. The force of the blow drove Sean right past Darcy, smashing him into a section of wall a few feet from the portal.

The collision of flesh on plywood, driven by the hammer, sent a wet, cracking sound echoing around the room. Forgetting her jammed finger, Darcy slapped her hand over her mouth, stifling a gasp, stomach churning. This was what really happened when Thor wielded Mjölfnir, a revolting tableau of blood splatter, and white bone and whatever else painted the now cracked plywood.

She pulled her eyes away from the sight, seeing Thor hurrying toward Jane, who was still bound by the magical razors. "If only...Loki," Thor said, standing before Jane, reaching timidly toward the ring at Jane's neck, "he would know what to do."

"Wow," said a voice beside her. "You really are thick." Darcy yelped, startled and found Sean standing a few feet from her side. Baffled, her eyes went to the wall, finding only cracked plywood--no blood, no guts.

Sean sneered at Thor. "Your brother isn't the only sorcerer who can do illusions." With that, a loud whimper that quickly evolved into agonized cries began. Darcy turned, finding the source: Jane. Her friend's hands were clamped to her head and she hunched over, her cries escalating in volume and pitch. The sound lanced through Darcy and she rounded on Sean. "Stop it," she pleaded.

He smiled beatifically at Thor, his pale face filled with calm cruelty. "Put down the hammer or not only does she die, but she dies in pain."

Rage and disappointment on his handsome face, Thor was setting Mjölfnir down even before Sean's command, but Darcy couldn't take the sound of Jane's cries. She lunged at Sean, unsure what she planned to do, settling on wild punch in the direction of his face. Her fist impacted the side of his head, but she couldn't enjoy her success because the blow sent a bolt of pain up her hand from her sore finger.

Before she had a chance to recover, a hand wrapped around her throat, fingertips sinking into her flesh like talons. Sean had his arm outstretched, holding her away from him. His grip, strong, like Loki's, shut off the air to her brain. Her fingernails clawed with animal desperation at his hand, but to no avail. He wasn't Loki, his actions were no mistake. Darkness, chased by pain began to cloak her mind and vision. Jane's shrieks of pain became a perverse anchor to waning consciousness. She made a desperate attempt to kick him, but already dizzy, her balance was off and the action just made Sean's chokehold more painful.

"Stop this!" roared Thor. "You are killing them."

"Not killing. Hurting," responded Sean. "Swear there will be no more heroics and..."

The rest of Sean's words and Thor's answer turned to incoherent mumbles as her oxygen-starved brain forgot how to process speech. Light narrowing into a black tunnel before her eyes, Darcy's hand grew heavy and she pawed feebly at the hand on her neck. Then the fearsome pressure lifted and suddenly free, she wobbled and collapsed to the ground. Wheezing, she stared at the old concrete beneath her feet, at the black oil stains and the patterns made by men's work boots in scattered sand on the surface.

"Darcy. Are you well?" asked Thor and all she managed was a nod. *I hurt everywhere. Jane's been tortured. And Jane and I are the reason why you can't kick Sean's ass. I'm so not "well"*

"On my honor," she heard Thor say, his voice distant through the throbbing of blood rushing back to her head, "I will go where ever you wish. Set the women free."

"Your honor," snorted Sean. "I've waited too long for this to trust your honor, Asgardian."

"H-huh-huh-huh," Darcy rasped, her nearly crushed windpipe not cooperating. "H-huh-how long is 'long?'"

Sean dropped a brief glance at her. "About four hundred years, give or take a few decades."

Her head whirling at both the span of time and the restored flow of oxygen, she groped for a response. A four hundred year long grudge! She blinked up at him. Even now, all elf-y, he still didn't look more than twenty.

Sean slid her a sideways look, a dark smile on his lips. "Don't tell me *you* don't understand. The guy who raped you. He got away with it. And it still eats at you and someday you'll get your revenge."

"No," she said, feeling Thor and Jane's attention snapping to her, Sean's revelation putting surprise and questions on their faces. "I won't. Because I don't let the past ruin my now."

He cocked an eyebrow at her, disbelief plain on face and she dropped her gaze to the floor. "Get up," Sean said, but she didn't move, her eyes suddenly drawn to movement in the shadows, along the wall where Sean's illusion had died. Scurrying along the floor was a lizard. Bic? Darcy's last memory of her pet was on the porch, when Loki had the seizure. Maybe it was another lizard. Take away Bic's habit of begging for treats and spitting fire, and she was utterly indistinguishable from her wild kin. Darcy kept her face turned to the floor, not daring to call attention to the animal.

"Up." Hands grasped her upper arms and pulled. Before she could protest, she stood before Sean, staring up at his face. Briefly she met his eyes searching for the person she thought she knew, but finding only a stranger. Powered by a weak surge of anger, she shook off his arms, staggering away from him.

"Fuck you," she muttered.

"Whatever," said Sean. He shoved his hoodie's sleeves up to his elbows, as if preparing for hard work. "Let's go."

"That's it," said a familiar smooth voice from the shadows by the doorway.

"Loki," Darcy whispered, her utterance echoed louder by Thor. The sight of him, upright and breathing, snapped the brittle barrier that held back her grief and tears started to roll down her face.

He moved forward into the light, the shadows clinging to him for an instant before letting go. The splotches of blood on his clothing gave the impression that a few patches of shadow hung on in the light. "Your intonation, so very human, right down to the modern American dialect, and so dissonant coming from an elf."

"That's close enough," said Sean, his face unconcerned, but tone sharp.

Loki halted near Thor, still about twenty feet from Sean and Darcy. In the feeble light, his face was death pale, perfect symmetry marred with gray blood stains and black gashes. "I remember your voice, the night you 'assisted' in our escape from Asgard." He shook his head ruefully. "Here I am, surrounded by mortals who speak in the same manner, and yet I did not make the connection. Our rescuer was an immortal who had lived so long among Midgard's mortals that he had quite literally, 'Gone native.'"

"You're worse than cockroach," observed Sean. "You just won't stay dead."

"And you are as dim as..." Loki smirked and indicated his brother with a tilt of the head, "him, if you think me so easily dispatched."

Sean studied Loki for a beat, then shook his head. "No, you were toast. I know it."

"Why? Because he thought so?" Loki sneered at Thor.

Eyes narrowed, Sean cut a look at Darcy. "No, because your pet mortal believed it and she's connected to you...somehow."

"Pet?" said Loki, with a perplexed smile. He studied Darcy. "Shouldn't a pet fetch slippers, or greet its master joyfully when he returns home? When last I returned from a journey, she set her pet dragon on me." Despite everything that had gone down, Darcy grinned.

Reminded by the conversation, Darcy surreptitiously cast a look behind her at the wall, searching. The lizard was closer. *Bic?* she thought hard, hoping that if it was her pet, that Loki had also programmed the little bugger for telepathy. The gray lizard stopped and then lunged, mouth suddenly full of a small, dark insect.

"So Odin's spell was bullshit," said Sean. "You've been free of Thor all along."

"Free as a bird," Loki said glibly. Darcy's eyes narrowed and she scrutinized her lover. She could feel him once again, pulsing against her awareness, but the signal, for lack of a better way to describe it, was different, weaker. Was this Loki or an illusion?

Sean nodded. "And now you want control of this portal."

"I do?" Loki's lean face brightened with innocence. Looking beyond Darcy, to the portal, he grinned. "What a splendid idea."

Sean rolled his eyes, which was a funny look for an elf. Darcy, however, continued to consider the mystery of Loki's state. She closed her eyes and explored the connection between them. Opening her eyes again, she bit her lower lip, worried.

With a shrug at the portal, Sean said, "So go. I'm not stopping you." Accentuating his invitation, the elf moved to the side, pulling Darcy with him, leaving a clear path to Loki's exit. Some of the sly mirth slipped from Loki's facade and his gaze slid to the portal. Undisguised avarice shone in his eyes.

"What are you waiting for?" grumbled Sean.

Loki flashed Sean a brilliant smile. "You have something of mine."

"Thor?" The elf's tone mimicked Loki's previous dry humor. "You hate him as much as I do."

"More, actually. You haven't had the pleasure of his company for centuries." He gave a pointed look at Darcy. "I mean, my pet."

Sean snorted. "Darcy? Really?"

"Yes, really. You seem surprised."

"She's pretty enough, but she's not my type. And you, Prince of Asgard, could do better."

"Elves," said Loki, derisively. "No taste, whatsoever." He cocked his head at Sean. "If she doesn't interest you, why haven't you set her free?"

"She amuses me."

"Careful," said Loki. "She once amused me. So much so that I now find myself negotiating her return with an upstart elf whelp." His green eyes narrowed and he focused on Sean. "An upstart whelp too stupid to get out of the way of a were-stag."

Reflexively, Sean glanced down at his arm, at the scar he said came from hunting.

"Ordinarily, elves, like my kind, can magic away their scars," Loki explained, addressing his words to Darcy. "A scar from a were-stag resists magic." He cocked his head at Sean. "He was wise to avoid contact with me, all these months. I would have known what he was immediately."

Thor and Jane watched the interaction in silence and Darcy wondered if Thor sensed what she did about Loki. She was convinced the person who stood there was real, not illusion and that filled her with dread. Separated by several yards, his magic, all that he was, nudged at her senses, but the power she felt was threadbare and coming undone. Did Sean know just how weak Loki was?

The hollow fear grew as she noticed how intently Sean was studying Loki.

Slow realization spread across his elven features. "You're fond of her. A mortal. That's just...sad."

Darcy braced herself for Loki's cruel contradiction of Sean's statement.

Loki instead huffed a regretful laugh. "Even a cursory study of my history would reveal that I've done things far more lamentable."

With a nod, Sean said, "Not a very smart admission."

"No more foolish than this," he swept a hand around the room, "your attempt at vengeance."

"You think I'm overreacting."

"I think you are overreacting?" Loki made a little snort of laughter. "I'm sorry. Apparently you don't know who I am." He swept a theatrical bow at Sean. "Loki...of Asgard," he winked at Darcy, "or somewhere, not here."

"Vengeance," continued Loki, "is my favorite vintage and in principle, your quarrel with Odin gladdens my heart. But your plan is clumsy and inelegant."

Sean returned Loki's laugh. "Right. Because throwing an army at New York was elegant."

To Darcy's surprise, Loki laughed and nodded sadly. "I've had better plans. Think of me as an object lesson."

What was his plan now, she wondered? Because if it depended on magic, in Loki's weakened state, they were all screwed. The lizard was now much closer and Darcy began to form a plan of her own. She shifted her feet noisily and when Sean paid no attention, she edged backward and away from his line of sight.

"I'll keep your many mistakes in mind," said Sean. "Are you leaving or not?" He waved vaguely at the portal.

Darcy leaned casually down and pretended to poke at the cuts on her knee. "Bic," she whispered, hoping the portal's hum would cover her voice, "come here, girl." Intent on hunting insects, the lizard didn't react. Darcy's attention wandered to the two wizards, hoping Sean hadn't noticed the little creature. Sean's focus was tight on Loki, a line of tension in his slight form that hadn't been there with Thor. Obviously, even though his gripe wasn't with Loki, he took the God of Mischief more seriously than Thunder.

When she looked back down, the lizard was at her feet. Bic's tiny eyes, black beads in a gray muzzle, were as impassive as a snake's, but the little creature focused on her with a dog-like intensity, skinny, striped, gray body held high on four legs. Darcy bent lower, and double knotted a shoelace. Quickly, she whispered a command.

Her whiptail lashing enthusiastically, Bic slithered away to the portal.

"I like you, boy," said Loki with a cheerful smile. "Our tastes in women may be divergent, but we share an enemy --Odin." Still smiling, he shrugged. "It's a pity I will have to kill you."

In response to Loki's declaration, the elf looked over his shoulder at her, and Darcy's eyes grew wide, driven by fear for herself, but also that he would spot Bic. To Loki, he said, "You're threatening me, when I have your pet?"

"A statement of fact." Loki's eyes moved up Darcy's body, stopping on her throat where bruises must already have been forming from Sean's punishing grip. "We passed the affable point of threats when you damaged said pet."

"And how do you plan on making me dead? With your teeth? Because you're still weak, *Odinson*."

A ghost of a smile haunted Loki's lips, but his eyes glittered with an inhuman madness, that made Darcy, who was pretty much immune to his unhinged looks, shudder. "I have very sharp teeth," he said, his tones velvety and deep. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Thor powerful frame stiffening, ready to react.

She licked her lips, taste-feeling magic from three sources, cinnamon, peppermint, and a much strong sensation of something peppery and hot. What was Bic doing? Had the tiny reptile, the four-legged cigarette lighter as Jane called her, understood Darcy's command? She didn't dare look in the portal's direction, for fear that Sean would notice. What if the portal had just flung her poor little pet into some other dimension?

"Ah," said Loki, another grin brightening his battered face. "You think I mean to kill you now? Patience, boy. First things first." With all his usual grace, he extended his left arm and flicked his fingers casually in Thor's direction.

"Lo-ki!" said Thor. "What-"

"This clever bit of dark elven sorcery has an edge that will part even your thick skull from your neck, *brother*." A ring of sharp magic, the same as the one around Jane's neck, had appeared around Thor's neck. Turning to Sean, Loki said, "I may not recall every spell I once knew, but like a child learning its runes, I can certainly copy."

In a few long strides, he stood beside Thor. He smiled winningly at Thor. "Relax, dear brother. Your end won't come at this boy's hand."

Darcy's feet did the thinking and they her eased back several more steps, away from Sean. Before she could stop herself, she glanced at the portal. The magical sparks continued to ride eddies of power, but another light had joined them. There in the back of the portal, cheerful yellow and orange tongues of flame licked and blackened the wooden lattice. Darcy had set her little friend on that part of the structure, assuming that Bic's tiny flame was no match for the thick posts. To her surprise, though, one of the posts in the back showed an ever-expanding ring of flame near its base. Bic, still in the barn, on planet Earth, crept in her jerky reptilian way along the back perimeter, spitting little goutts of flame at the wooden latticework.

"No!" snarled Sean. He spun, rounding on Darcy, who stared at him, eyes big as saucers. "I'll-"

"Play a rousing game of spot the real Darcy?" observed Loki. Darcy swallowed, almost choking on the thick taste of cinnamon on her skin, in her nose, in her throat. Sean's eyes were no longer on her. At least a half dozen other Darcys were now in the barn, with the same bumps and bruises on their necks, hands, and knees, but wearing a variety of expressions. The one closest to her smirked and flipped Sean off.

Darcy skittered back several steps closer to the portal, but her movement didn't catch Sean's attention, his eyes passing right over her. Closing her eyes, she reached for her connection to Loki and felt his magic evaporating. Those two spells had cost him a lot.

"The oaf is mine to kill," announced Loki with a twitchy eagerness that felt all too honest. Darcy licked her lips. She'd deal with Loki's fratricidal urges later. First break the portal. "Good girl," she hissed at Bic. "The posts, too. Hurry."

With one last glower at the Darcy doppelgangers, Sean turned his attention to Jane. In seconds, Jane's hands were back on her head, her mouth a rictus of agony.

"No," Darcy whispered. "No. No. No!" She rushed toward Sean. "Stop hurting her. I'm here." Waving her hands to get his attention, she stopped just a stride before him. "Loki. Take off the spell. Let him see me. Please. He's hurting her."

And Sean's eyes found her, just as the sense of Loki began to fade. Licking her lips, trying to taste the last bits of cinnamon, she was otherwise a frozen statue before the enraged elf. "Please," she croaked through her fear.

Sean's hand snagged a handful of her T-shirt and hauled her toward him. A bright sting flared on her throat as he pulled her back against his chest. "If Prince Thor dies, then your pet follows him into the afterlife." Jane's cries fell silent and Darcy looked her way, an apology in her eyes.

Loki's eyes darted to his brother, but before he could respond, Sean cocked his head and sniffed. "What-?"

"It's cig-garette smoke." Jane's voice, wobbly, but filled with confidence answered the question.



"SHIELD has found us." Darcy caught Jane's ever-so slight glance and realized that Jane must have noticed what she and Bic were doing.

Even though the smell was very clearly not cigarette, Sean stiffened, his posture focused on the door. Darcy's head turned involuntarily toward the portal. Bic darted to another post and belched a plume of flame.

Unfortunately, Sean caught her motion and turned as well. His response was one that she was getting accustomed to: "Darcy, what did you do?" The sharp edge at her throat dropped away along with his arms around her and she squirmed away.

The elf was staring at the portal in dull horror, an ordinary dagger in hand. Loki, however, was grinning. "Perhaps," he suggested, smoothly, "if expecting Darcy in the proximity, you should have built it from...asbestos?"

Self-preservation kicking in, Darcy skittered back from Sean. He turned his face to her, a cold mask that she knew concealed lethal fury. Before he could speak, she stammered, "M-mortals rule, elves drool." Her eyes flicked toward Loki.

Reminded of the real danger in the room, Sean turned, the dagger still in hand, his weight on the balls of his feet, ready. Loki and Thor mirrored his stance. Magic rose in a thick, invisible cloud.

Darcy didn't watch the impending confrontation because another concern yanked her thoughts away. Remembering what happened when she broke the portal in the Kings' barn, the explosion of hay, she turned, looking for Bic, who happily continued to immolate the remaining latticework and posts. The many lengths of steel rebar woven into the frame's structure were shivering ominously. The image of heavy metal falling and squashing the tiny reptile flashed before Darcy's eyes.

Loki, Sean and everything else forgotten, she practically lunged toward her pet. "Bic! Come here, now!" Except nothing made a fire lizard happier than turning stuff to charcoal, and the animal stayed on target. *Poof!* More wood took fire. From the corner of her eye, she saw Sean take a step in her direction, but getting Bic out of harm's way was all that mattered. She paused at the edge of the portal and then plunged in, hoping it wouldn't start up and teleport her someplace with no flush toilets or iPods. Bic finally noticed her and slithered to her side.

What came next happened at blinding speed. She stood, Bic on her shoulder. There was a light pop and then the top-of-the-mountain, plugged-ear sensation. Next, the rapid descent of her stomach, as she realized her mistake. Around her, Sean's alien magic convulsed and agonized. She took several rapid steps back, out of the structure.

In the barn, everyone else had stopped, realizing what was happening. Sean stood about ten feet away, one hand clenching the dagger, the other raised as if about to cast a spell. Her eyes met Sean's. She swallowed, her ears unplugged and the portal collapsed with a roar.

## Chapter 36

### CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

#### Trio in D-Minor

##### I.

The turquoise blue sky, framed by jagged teeth of destroyed plywood on the opposite wall, blazed and Darcy's eyes watered in the sudden brightness. Against the glare, a lone slender figure was silhouetted against the classic western U.S. landscape. The figure's outline was broken by many long protrusions, like quills on a porcupine. As she watched, the figure wobbled and then sank to his knees.

*Sean?* He'd been closer before hadn't he? Her thoughts moved slowly, as though slogging through something viscous and tar-like. Sean now crouched near the gaping hole in the wall. *Explosion.* Right. He'd been in the line of fire, just the same as her. *Explosion.* That must have been why she couldn't hear anything.

The silence was stunning, a complete absence of sound, not just the din from the chaos in the barn but everything, road noise, the drone of planes flying above, dogs barking, wind in the sagebrush - all sound was gone. Her knees wavered, and she shifted her feet apart, feeling a tug of something at her side. All around her, bits of rebar were scattered in a half circle.

A perfect half circle. Around the back and side of her.

She lifted her head, her brain making horrible sense of what she had seen seconds before. Sean was on his hands and knees by the destroyed wall, watching her with those beautiful cornflower blue eyes. She met his gaze and shuddered as realization and pain, emotional and physical, hit her.

She remembered this silence. She had experienced it once before on the night when Edwards's repair shop had exploded. If she closed her eyes, which was something she inexplicably wanted to do now, she could still remember the oily stink of asphalt, the flash of debris tearing past Sean and her through the warm summer air, and the complete silence. At the time, she figured it had been because the blast had deafened her.

Before she and Sean had fallen to the road, he had said something unintelligible, almost like gibberish. She'd dismissed it as a function of the moment, but now the memory sharpened, focus tightened by the supernatural silence around her and she remembered words spoken in a strange language, and the sizzle of magic as he fell against her back.

Their eyes met across the barn and her heart clenched in shock. He'd saved her life that night, shielding her with magic from the power of the blast and debris. Sean blinked, his left hand slid out from under him and he nearly did a face plant on the barn's hard floor. Outside the protective bubble of magic, Darcy could sense people moving, but their motion seemed languid, as if time had slowed. Or maybe it was just a side effect of the shock at what had just happened.

At her side, the weird pull began to feel more like pressure and she wavered, eyes on Sean. Even without her glasses, she could see why his hand had slipped. He had been impaled, multiple times by the lethal sideways rain of iron rebar. A crimson pool sat on the barn's oily concrete surface. His left shoulder was a bloody mess of splintered white bone and red flesh. There wasn't a spot on him that wasn't a shade of blood red.

*Not immune to that much iron, are you?* she thought nastily, and then, despite everything that he'd done, she felt ashamed of her thoughts.

The pressure at her side began to morph into a dull pain and she took a breath, the first in how long? Not long, she thought, as her mind put together the pieces. The backlash from the failed portal spell, broken by her, must have been equivalent to the shockwave from the explosion at Edwards's shop. Darcy was no scientist or a wizard, but she knew it must have taken a lot of power to hold back that kind of energy. That night they had been close together and Sean easily protected them both from the blast.

But this time...

Sean's gaze moved down her body, stopping on her lower torso, expression suddenly defeated. He met her stare again, and for second, grief and regret took over his face. His eyes dulled and he fell to the floor.

Pain, hot and agonizing, crystallized on her right side and she followed Sean's gaze. On the T-shirt's gray fabric, a large red stain had bloomed like a rose. At the top of the stain, a slate gray section of rebar protruded from ripped cotton. A stream of blood ran down her leg and was dammed by her sock. In the distance a voice called her name, the tone sort of panicked, which made no sense, because *that* voice didn't do panic.

"Ow," she said, breathless, eyes watering from the pain. Her legs turned rubbery and she crumpled toward the ground. She must have made a feeble attempt to stop her fall, but her face still hit the ground hard, the impact rattling through her brain.

*This time*, she thought, *Sean had to make a choice. He chose me. He tried to save me...*

## II.

*This was wrong*, he thought. There should not be voices, because he was beyond the veil, beyond the point where the five senses worked. He, or the remains of himself, was coming apart like smoke in a stiff wind, becoming smaller and smaller particles that separated and began to disperse in an infinity of different directions, to spread across the Nine Realms and beyond.

But the voices reached him somehow, a man and woman, arguing. Bits of him that had once been a child tried to reach the speakers, knowing he was the source of their conflict and distressed by the fact.

*Not for me*. His protestation awoke a memory in a much older Loki: the anguished face of a pretty young woman, blue eyes red with tears, colorful lowlights in her brown hair turning a deep, mournful blue.

*Not for me*.

The arguing continued, and this older Loki sneered, wondering why *she* bothered, why she still called him "son." She, more than anyone, should have been glad to finally rid herself of the need to bestow kindness on a monster.

Nevertheless, the woman's voice rose, impassioned, angry, determined, and if he had lungs, he would have sighed. If he had a mouth, he would have said, "Enough, let it be. I'm tired."

But she forged on, and one snippet of the conversation reached whatever senses he had left. "He yet has work to do," she argued. Loki agreed.

He really needed to kill an elf.

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The return to his fleshy remains was more excruciating than his exit, disparate pieces of himself, many quite happy to be free to wander the universes, shoved rudely back into a bloodied, bruised and painful body. He groaned at the painful return of senses, sound too loud, touch sharp as knives, the cloying taste of blood on his tongue, lungs burning with the stench of magic and fresh-cut lumber, and eyes watering from the burn of the feeble fey light.

He had pulled himself together as quickly as possible, though even now, there was little of himself to speak of, including his magic. Studying the power structure behind the elf's construct, his first plan had been to simply let the elf take Jane, Thor and Darcy to whatever destination he had planned. Loki would then follow soon after, because, even if the elf hadn't stolen *his* Darcy, Loki was still chained to Odin's moronic son. He had been given a reprieve, but the damned spell still controlled his destiny.

The key to his freedom sat on a nightstand back in the appalling structure that he'd been forced to call home for the past several months. And he quickly spotted, woven into the room-sized battery's magical current, a self-destruct spell that would be triggered by the portal's use. Consequently, however he analyzed the situation, all possible solutions led to the elf's demise. He needed the elf's portal, but he required more time. Time to return "home" and finish the tool that would break the bound between him and Thor; time to return here and adjust the portal to suit his purposes.

Time, he acknowledged grudgingly, to convince a certain impudent mortal woman to accompany him.

He didn't witness Sean's near strangulation of his "pet," but he felt it, the tingling awareness of her panic. And when he entered the next room, what the elf had done was written on Darcy's neck in red bruises. He decided then that while he agreed with the elf's sentiments regarding Odin and Thor, what honor he still owned would not let the attack on his companion stand unanswered.

When he had cast the illusion of circular razors about Thor's neck, he had been sorely tempted to truly copy the elf's work and be done with the oaf. Unfortunately, Darcy would have never forgiven him for killing the fool, any more than she would tolerate harm coming to Jane.

Complications, yes, but Loki thrived on complications.

Cast in a role that carried the embarrassing taint of hero, however, he felt somewhat out of his element, and even a few simple illusions left him drained and feeble. Which is why he didn't anticipate Darcy's misguided and dangerous attempt to thwart the elf's plan.

Now, in the seconds after the explosion, he stared dumbly across the room at Darcy, who stood just a few paces from the destroyed portal, whole and alive. Seeing the rivulet of red running down her leg, at first he had thought her monthly blood had come upon her unexpected and with great fervor. This thought was quickly negated by the spreading continent of crimson on the pale gray fabric of her shirt.

He spoke her name, breathless, unheard.

"Loki?"

Turning he found Thor staring at him expectantly, and more than a little worried. If Darcy's wound wasn't etched into his vision, he would have laughed. Instead, he said, irritably, "Leave off, fool,

twas an illusion, nothing more." It took him two tries, but the illusion around Thor's neck finally obeyed its creator and dissipated. He turned back to Darcy, as Thor hurried to Jane's side.

Emotions, changeable, evanescent, swirled through him, but two reigned over all others. First, indignant fury that anyone would hurt her, Darcy Lewis, friend to Loki of Asgard and therefore one who should be inviolate to harm from all. And then the familiar resentment that her plight so moved him, that the red tide of her life should leave him with this sick-making sensation in his belly.

Resentment ruled for an instant, rooting him to the concrete, as he balked like a mule at his heart's prodding. *The girl's injury will not move me, she is nothing*, he insisted to himself, even as one foot shifted ahead of the other, then the next.

"Loki." Thor again.

"What?" he snapped, pausing.

"Is the elf truly dead?" Thor stared across the room at Sean's unmoving form. The reason for his concern being the magical razors that still encircled Jane's neck, wrists and thighs.

"Yes. It's merely residual magic." Scowling at Thor, because the oaf made such a pleasing target for ire, he said, "Use Mjölnir."

Thor blinked, a mixture of confusion and dawning irritation on his face. *The dolt thinks I jest*. "The binding can be undone with small jolts of lightning." It occurred to Loki that he should caution the fool against electrocuting the woman, but frankly, he didn't much care. Without elaborating further, he hurried toward Darcy, speaking her name louder and grimacing at the anxious edge in his voice. She fell before he reached her.

The short trip across the barn devoured his remaining strength and he sank heavily onto the hard ground where she lay. Around her, the air still felt thin, although the elf's protective spell has dissipated. She sprawled mostly on her left side, the vast stain on her lower torso visible. Her little pet pawed anxiously at her hand. Loki glared at the creature, his hand fisted, the temptation to flatten the beast strong. Unaware of its impending doom, the determined reptile scratched more energetically on Darcy's hand. He lifted his hand over Bic, knuckles white. Muscles in his arm tensed and then relaxed with his exasperated sigh. "Away," he muttered, and waved the beast off with his hand.

He eased Darcy carefully onto her back, her head in his lap, finding the cause of her injury. A short length of steel rebar, protruded from the wound. "Darcy," he said, relieved when her eyelids fluttered open.

Lines tightened above her brow and her blue eyes shone with pain. "Fuck, it hurts so much." She shuddered and her eyes closed again. His hands went to the wound at her side, his brain sorting through tattered memories, trying to remember anything about treating lethal wounds in mortals. *You don't*, a voice observed coolly. *They die, end of story, move along*.

"Thor," he rasped, "here, now."

He touched her face, pushing aside errand locks of hair, and smearing her own blood on her cheek in the process. Bruises already swelled to reddish hills on her cheek and chin. "Darcy, look at me," he said with all the command of a Prince of Asgard. "Now."

The ploy worked. When she opened her eyes, he saw the usual stubborn insolence. But then she

spoke and her words filled him with cold dread. "It's okay. Doesn't hurt anymore."

When her eyes shut this time, he grasped her face with both hands, shaking gently. "Do not close your eyes. Darcy!" She didn't respond and when his gaze moved to her lowlights, a hollow pit of dread ripped open in his stomach. Even when she slept, the strands were a lively riot of purple, green and blue.

Now, however, they were fading, turning a dark, sickly gray before his eyes.

"No," he growled. "You will not do this." Fingers on her throat, he felt her heartbeat, the pulse thready and limpid. "There is still so much we must do. The places I will take you. The things you will see. Do not go where I cannot follow."

Hearing himself, he fisted a handful of fabric at her sleeve to keep from shaking her hard and venting his frustration at this intolerable situation. Intolerable because this insignificant mortal's life should not carry such worth. Intolerable because it did.

Against all logic, he had let her slip through his defenses, allowed her to begin to feed a need. What lay between them was more than sexual, of that he was certain. In a few years, the novelty of skin on skin would fade, but what remained promised to be deeper. In this belligerent mortal lived the potential for an anachronism to a singular creature like Loki--friendship. The kind of bond that Thor shared with the Warriors Three and Sif.

And in that bond, with her at his side, he felt a reaffirmation of his sense of self. Neither Odinson nor Laufeyson, but rather simply Loki. And in that new identity, came a rekindling of hope. He had resisted its power, but hope infected his system, the vector, this insufferable mortal. *This dying mortal.*

"Darcy." Loki whispered her name again. "Open your eyes, you stupid girl." He leveled the insult, words he promised never to say to her, as a desperate weapon, but to no avail, mortality clear in the slowing beat of a heart. And with every heartbeat, she grew weaker, the promise of companionship in a small warm body washing away in a flood of blood, a bright presence to become just more meat.

"Thor," he said again, this time hearing the heavy sound of the prince's footfalls, shadowed by Jane's lighter, but faster tread.

"Darcy?" called Jane. Seconds later, she dropped to her knees, a hand reaching for one of Darcy's. "Loki, is she-?"

"She lives," he said, the woman's obvious distress and fondness for Darcy firing an odd sense of warmth in him toward her. He started to set his hand near the wound, but paused, uncertain what to do. Once, his brain carried basic healing spells, enough to keep another Aesir alive long enough to reach Asgard's more skilled healers. Now, that knowledge was lost to him, and worthless on one such as Darcy, anyway. He set his hand gently on the soaked T-shirt fabric, just as Thor crouched beside Jane.

Darcy's hot blood coated his fingers, ruby and thick. He looked up at Thor and said, stupidly, "She bleeds."

"You can help her, right?" said Jane, her attention moving back and forth between the two men.

With a wary look at Loki, Thor extended his arm, laying a hand near his brother's on Darcy's torso. "I may be able to slow the bleeding, but she is mortal. To do more, would be the end of her."

"I don't understand," said Jane.

"Mortal physiology responds badly to all but the simplest healing spells," Loki explained. "Magical healing triggers..." he paused, searching for the Midgardian words, "uncontrolled cell growth, like a cancer. Only Asgard's skilled healers have the means to circumvent mortal weakness..."

Loki met Thor's eyes, seeing the same thought go through the man's head. It was strange, how in this most unlikely moment, he thought of Odin, wondered if it were still possible to use the portal to return to Asgard and beg the All-Father's aid in saving Darcy.

Thor looked down, focusing his concentration on Darcy's injury, and Loki knew he had come to the same conclusion. Even if the portal were functioning and they could take Darcy to Asgard, Odin would be likely to forbid her healing, not only as a means of punishing Loki, but because even now he would insist that no mortal was an acceptable mate for a prince of Asgard.

"Then we need to get her to a hospital. Now!" said Jane. "Her car is outside, right?"

"No," said Loki, an idea forming in his head. "Take her to SHIELD's facility. Their physicians are superior, particularly with wounds such as this one."

"But the local hospital is closer," insisted Jane.

"No," said Loki, meeting Thor's blue eyes, "it isn't."

Understanding, Thor nodded and with another cautious look at his brother, reached both his hands out, and Loki helped ease Darcy into his arms. "I can carry you both," said Thor to Loki as his stood.

"You cannot," said Loki. "Not if you carry her with the degree of care required."

"But Odin's spell still binds us, does it not?"

*So the space between the dolt's ears holds more than air.* Loki gave Thor a halfhearted smirk. "It does," he admitted. "Take her, now."

Thor's knees bent as he started to kneel. "Then you can put your arms about my neck, and I can carry you on my back."

"No!" Neck muscles shuddering with the effort, he lifted his gaze to meet Thor's eyes. "I don't have the strength."

"But..."

"Thor," interrupted Jane, "Darcy's dying."

Thor turned his gaze on the mortal in his arms, then to Jane and Loki. Torment filled his eyes.

Loki spoke again, as forceful as possible, hiding his weakness in the timbre of his voice. "You will take her alone, now. I survived your leaving once, I will survive it again."

"It'll be okay, Thor," said Jane. Turning to Loki, she put a hand on his arm, blinking as she realized that she'd touched him. Her throat jerked as she swallowed nervously and said, "We'll follow in Darcy's car."

Still Thor didn't move, emotions storming in his blue eyes. Taking a deep breath, Loki threw his last weapon at Thor. "If you wish me to ever call you brother again, you will do this."

### III.

Thor felt a good measure of shame at his indecision. It wasn't that he didn't value Darcy's life, because he did. Although he would never admit it to Jane, most mortals were mere abstractions to him, much as they were to Loki. Of course, Thor's recent dealings with mortals had been more benevolent than his brother's. Nevertheless, Thor held few of Midgard's citizenry in the same regard as even the lowliest Aesir.

Darcy was one of the few, along with Jane, the Avengers and a smattering of others, who had risen in his mind to person of real value, on par with another Asgardian.

Her elevation to friend, however, had not been immediate. Initially, he had dismissed her as a empty-headed girl, given to excessive chatter and too brash. Polite for Jane's sake, he paid Darcy little mind, and assumed that his brother would share his assessment of the girl. Actually, he worried that his brother, given his intolerant state of mind, might take an instant dislike to her and commit some act of cruelty.

Loki may have been broken and half-mad, but he remained clever and he saw through Darcy's chattering artifice quickly. Thor had watched as Loki not only tolerated her crass mannerisms, but began favor her presence, even shadow her footsteps in a manner that, had he been any other personage, would be interpreted as vaguely protective.

In light of his brother's interest, Thor began to genuinely converse with the girl, finding beneath the guise of silly child, a bright and startlingly astute mind. Even though her speech was cluttered with confusing Midgardian references, philosophical aspects of their conversations--like the notion that history was written by the victor--stayed with him.

And Jane, for all her frequent exasperation with her assistant, was quick to defend her from slights. When Thor called Darcy "silly," Jane had disagreed. "No, she's not. It's just an act. You shouldn't underestimate her."

"If you wish me to ever call you brother again, you will do this," said Loki, and Thor's mind seized, frozen by the choice between his brother and the young mortal who lay limp and light as a feather in his arms.

As he studied Loki's familiar face, an unpleasant thought came to mind. Perhaps this was some new treachery. Perhaps Loki's words to the elf regarding Odin's spell had been the truth. *I leave him again, and he flees Midgard, with Jane as his hostage. Perhaps this has been his plan all along.*

The shadow of this dark possibility was lightened by a memory. His mind replayed the time he'd barged into Loki's room, set to share a thought of great import (or not so important, as now, he could not remember what it had been), and found Darcy in Loki's company. Most notably, Darcy at Loki's side and his brother at ease with her intrusion.

He had studied them, the two merry conspirators, grinning over the carton of ice cream, absorbed in a conversation of magic and little bits of mortal technology, and felt a peculiar emotion. Jealousy. Not directed at Loki, but at Darcy.

In that instant, he knew that the person sitting next to Loki wasn't just a mortal doxy. If Loki's words at that time were to be trusted, a fair stretch of credulity to be sure, they'd done no more than share a few kisses. Yet his secretive, solitary brother was allowing her into his private space with no motivation beyond the chance to share company.



She was his friend.

In Asgard, even Loki had associations outside of family: lovers, even friends, although all were likely motivated by the benefits of a relationship with a prince. All relationships for a prince, even for Thor, were wrapped in complicating layers of decorum and politics. Simple friendship, absent the trappings of courtly machinations, was an unknown quantity to both brothers. In truth, the ease of friendship may have been the best thing about life in exile on Midgard.

Thor, nonetheless, had true and trusted boon companions. And Loki had only Thor.

This wasn't the first time Thor had blundered into Loki's room to find him lost in some bit of arcana, his little brother's constant companion. But this time, his sibling wasn't alone, and Thor felt the strange sting of exclusion, as he, the intruder, stood in the threshold, Darcy and Loki grinning at him. Seeing him, Loki's smile faded, but Thor could see the shift in his posture as he leaned slightly toward Darcy, as if finding refuge in her presence.

Shameful jealousy rose like a hungry ghost in his belly. Seeing her wedged too comfortable at Loki's side, Thor knew that she was the key to getting his brother back, and yet, in the course he might lose some of Loki to her.

Only seconds had passed with Thor lost in his thoughts, but each valuable to the mortally wounded woman he carried. *Do I hesitate out of jealousy?* wondered Thor. Jane's gaze, fortified by her love for her friend, and disinterest in Loki's fate, prodded him hard.

Darcy shivered, a flutter against his chest. Loki's eyes caught his with a brilliance that did little to hide the weakness writ on his winter white face, mottled with bruises and blood, hollow eyes and skin drawn tight over cheekbones. Thor looked down at Darcy, and gently tightened his grip on her. Jane was right. Darcy did deserve better than his treacherous brother. But she stood no chance for better or worse unless she lived through this day.

He shifted his grip on her so that most of her weight--insubstantial to him--was carried by his right arm, wounded side away from him to minimize the possibility of starting the bleeding again. A few strides, stepping over the damned elf's corpse, took him to the opening ripped by the explosion in the building's side. Mjölnir began to spin in his left hand, ruffling Darcy's hair and his. His right was his dominant arm, but he could use the left, if necessary.

Loki remained seated on the concrete, back to Thor, but head turned enough to watch Thor's departure from the corner of his eye. Jane nodded briefly at Thor and then turned to Loki. Still feeling a nip of guilt at leaving her with Loki, Thor leaped lightly skyward and made for SHIELD's facility.

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Approaching the facility, Thor noted that the herds of milling cattle were greatly improved by this approach, at least as much as the stench of piss and shit confined itself to horizontal dispersal and didn't reach the heights that Thor and Darcy traversed.

When he landed on the concrete walkway before the ugly ranch home's front door, the guards were already arrayed in defensive formation, guns pointing at him. "Are you blind?" Thor growled loudly, "it is I, Thor of Asgard." But the guards, unnerved by his airborne arrival, kept their weapons trained on him.

He took a step forward and one guard, a young male with brutally short blond hair, snapped, "Stop right there!"

With a pointed glance down at Darcy, Thor responded, "This is Darcy Lewis, one of your own. She needs a healer, immediately!"

"How do we know this isn't one of Loki's tricks?" returned the guard and several others nodded.

Thor narrowed his eyes and swung Mjölnir once, letting the wooden haft snap into his hand. If the fools would not listen, he would force his way into the building. In his arms, Darcy shivered, her tremors now almost nonstop. "It will be well, little sister," he said softly to her, pressing her as close to the heat of his chest as he dared. Drawing a breath, he began to gather the electric power of lightning. Despite his professed fondness for mortals, he had no qualms about plowing through a few to get into the building. He was certain Jane would understand.

"What are you morons doing!" said a female voice and Thor paused. A woman had emerged from the building. Dressed in blue jeans and a plain red shirt, "civvies" as the mortals said, she was taller than many of the men, pale blond hair tied in a queue. Ice blue eyes on Thor, she pushed past her colleagues and asked the obvious question. "What happened to her?" Though the guards' weapons were now also pointed on her, the woman marched up to Thor.

"Injured, by the one who killed your guards," said Thor, to make it clear that Loki wasn't the guilty party.

Without hesitation, the woman spun on a heel and gestured for him to follow.

"What the hell are you doing, Pam?" snarled the male guard.

"Grow a pair, Williams," she snapped, "and get out of our way." She stopped before another guard, a heavily muscled, olive-skinned man. "Give me your radio." Yanking the thing from his belt before he could agree, she continued on, speaking into the device. "This is Pam Johnson. We need a med team and gurney at the ranch level, now! Thor's here with Ms. Lewis and she's hurt bad. No, this isn't a joke. You going to be one to tell Director Fury one of his assets died because you were spanking your meat instead of doing your job? A medic, now!"

Thor smiled, the woman reminding him of a somewhat coarser, but equally ferocious Sif. Thrown by Pam's commanding presence, the other guards parted at his approach, weapons still on him, but with less enthusiasm.

"We're heading for the elevator," Pam informed the person on the radio. She opened and held the door while Thor entered the building.

The security scanners shrieked, the sound throbbing in Thor's ears as they passed through the entryway. "She's got piece of rebar in her side," Pam said to the guard at that post, who nervously waved a wand scanner over Thor and Darcy, the device chirping enthusiastically both at the rebar and Mjölnir, which Thor usually didn't bring into the building.

Following Pam to the elevator door, Thor then waited for the medic team to arrive. The guard with the wand scanner hovered nervously around them, as his fellow guards also milled about, glaring at Thor and Pam.

Darcy's shivering vibrated up and down his arms. Pam reached out and found Darcy's hand. "Hang in there, kid." Turning to the elevator door, she muttered, "Come on, come on, come on."

The med team arrived in flurry of persons in white garb and several more guards. With brisk efficiency, they took Darcy from him, and placed her on the cot on wheels, the "gurney," Thor presumed, and moved her into the elevator, already beginning to work. But even as the doors

winked shut like vertical eyelids, he heard their cool voices rising in alarm, a clear indication that something was going wrong. Thor stared at the closed doors, wondering if he should have followed, learned her fate for Loki's sake, for Jane's. For his own.

From behind him, he heard a female voice, not Pam's, grumble, "I knew that bastard would get her killed. Shame. She's a nice girl."

Angry, Thor rounded on the speaker, recognizing the woman who had served as guard on their floor as of late. "This is *my* doing." His deep voice boomed throughout the room. "MINE! Not Loki's!" The enormity of the situation, that he, not Loki, had been the locus of the elf's ire struck him, muddying his thoughts like too much mead. In his hand, Mjölfnir sizzled.

Around him, the black clad guards stared in wide-eyed confusion, a few lifting their weapons again. Feeling a hand on his arm, he turned, meeting Pam's blue eyes. "She will live," he said, the statement living somewhere between question and statement.

"I hope so," replied Pam.

"I must go," he said, the strength gone from his voice. "Loki and I have been apart too long." He strode from the building, vaguely aware that the guards scattered like hens before him, something in his mien forestalling any stupid heroics.

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Thor spotted the blue car a few miles from the facility, on a lonely stretch of road. He landed well ahead on the roadway, giving Jane ample time to slow and halt the vehicle. Tires squeak-hissed on black pavement as she stopped the vehicle a bit too roughly. She threw open the door, leaped out and ran to him.

"Darcy--?"

"She is in capable hands," Thor answered, collecting Jane into his arms, grateful to feel her small body, alive and unharmed against his. He kept his concerns, the image of the healer's worried faces, to himself.

Loosening his hold on Jane, he directed her back to the vehicle, just a few paces away. "Loki?"

"He's...I don't know." Jane face picked up a slight sharpness, an expression that frequented her face whenever the topic of Loki arose, the result of her usually kind nature warring with her loathing for his brother.

Squeezing her shoulder gently in comfort, he made for the vehicle. He grasped the door handle and tugged it too hard, little bits of metal bending in his grip. Like stardust, glittering bits of glass cascaded from the vehicle's interior onto the dark road, and Thor shrugged. Given the damage his brother's torments had already wrought on the machine, the twisted handle hardly mattered.

Loki was slumped in the seat in an indolent, loose-limbed manner that tugged at Thor with its familiarity. With his eyes closed, head leaned against the headrest, he appeared to have been caught in the midst of an inopportune nap. Pausing for a moment to observe Loki in this unguarded state (or so he assumed--with Loki, it may well have been an act), Thor searched his face as if it might contain insight into why things had gone so terribly wrong between them. But unconscious Loki was no more forthcoming than the conscious version.

Leaning in, one knee on the edge of the seat, Thor took Loki's face in his hands. "Awake. You have not earned such an easy exit, brother." Between his palms, Loki's pale skin bore the cold stillness

of death, the very same as it had in the barn. *Perhaps*, Thor thought grimly, *this was his plan, his true escape.*

Giving his face a light slap, Thor growled, "Enough, Loki. Awake." He struck a bit harder, the action not eliciting even the slightest twitch. "Is this one of your illusions? Tis a fine one. But Darcy awaits." Thor drew back his hands, the left tacky with fresh blood that sheeted the right side of Loki's face. In the bright light of day, the blood was more purple than red and the splatters on Loki's clothes and surroundings closer to blue. Oddly, it was the amount, not the color that troubled Thor. Too much, even for an immortal.

With one obvious exception the majority of his injuries were head wounds. "Loki, your hand." The fingers on Loki's left hand were twisted at odd angles, white knuckle bones poking opportunistically through torn, bloodied skin.

"I think he was trying to stay conscious," said Jane. She sat down in the driver's seat, and pointed at the dashboard, just above the radio, where a fist-sized hole in shattered plastic revealed the wires and workings of the vehicle.

Out of habit, Thor rubbed his chin, before realizing that he smeared his brother's blood into his beard. He sighed, studying this too-still version of Loki. Blood in various stages of drying, had spiked sections of his black hair, accentuating the ragged ends, the legacy of Thor's ill-advised attempt at cutting hair. Not for the first time, Thor wondered why normally vain Loki hadn't corrected the matter. Especially since Darcy had taken an instant delight in teasing him about his ill-kept hair.

Seeing Jane gingerly lift Loki's broken hand, he dropped his gaze to watch her pick at something between the webbing of his middle and forefinger. A fragment of blue plastic.

Jane, blinked, her eyes tracking from Loki's hand to Thor's face, clearly surprised by her own actions. "I-I'm sorry. I still hate him." Her throat rose and fell as she swallowed. "But," she picked another shard from his flesh, "when he looked at Darcy, there was something...not Loki, I felt sorry for him. I almost liked him. I think I saw the person you remember."

Thor nodded, but didn't voice his thoughts. The person revealed on Loki's face by Darcy's injury was no one he had ever known. Thor had yet to decide if this was a good or a bad thing.

He put his hands on Loki's shoulders and shook. "Come back, brother. No more games." Loki's body responded with an unnatural bonelessness. "You said you'd survive my leaving. Was that another lie?" If silence had a sound, Loki's eerie stillness was a symphony, underscored by the vastness of the desert landscape, gray green sagebrush under an azure sky. Jane broke the quiet with a small sigh, her head bowed as she gently set Loki's hand down on his thigh.

Thor tightened his grip, feeling his brother's slight frame beneath heavy fabric and leather. He was still too thin. The memory of their night out in Santa Fe came to him, of Loki sharing a meal with Darcy, eating more than his fair share of the meat and vegetables on the plate.

"Loki, the healers assured me that Darcy will survive," he lied, trying one last ploy. "You know how much she detests being beneath ground for any length of time. When she awakens, she will be frightened, alone. You must be there for her."

The only answer was the hissing whistle of the dry desert breeze through the sagebrush.

## Chapter 37

### CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Life went on. Even underground, lying on her back, beneath suffocating tons of dirt, feeling like she was in a coffin, but knowing she was thoroughly alive.

Some may have argued miracle, but Darcy Lewis had seen too much of gods and magic, and science that looked a whole lot like magic, to believe in miracles. She had been saved by modern medicine. She had been saved by love and friendship from two people, who, despite their destructive, violent impulses, had been willing to sacrifice all for her. One was gone forever, and the other...

Darcy squinted at the big white clock on the wall. A chem lab's worth of drugs swam through her system and it took a minute for her to remember what the little hand, midway between seven and eight, big hand on six, meant. 7:30. In the morning, if the comatose state of her companion was any indication.

This was the first time in days that her mind could assemble coherent thoughts, but she knew he'd been around, tormenting the doctors and nurses with nasty mutterings of incompetence regarding her care. Even so, as she looked over at him, where he slept on a chair, in an uncomfortable origami of long limbs and black and green Asgard-lite, her heart ached with a powerful tenderness toward the insufferable bastard. He slept in unnatural stillness and her nerves jiggled, raw and edgy as she instinctively watched his chest. A long second followed another, then another; a tiny, irrational panic grew in her heart until there was movement and she knew he still drew breath.

She puffed out a sigh of relief, her attention next drawn to an out-of-place splash of white on his left hand. Her eyes struggled with focus before telling her that the hand was swathed in white gauze, a silvery glint of splints on two fingers. All that remained of the wounds on his face were watered-down bruises and a smattering of thin, red scratches, some leaving a crosshatch pattern like a lazy artist's shading.

Seeing her glasses sitting on the nightstand by the bed, she started to reach for them, only to find her attempt impeded by an IV and a heart rate monitor. She scowled at both, already feeling an impatience at her situation, helpless, trapped by her injury and these wires and tubes. Also, the IV, with its catheter buried in her flesh, icked her out.

A yawn pulled her mouth open and she gave up on the glasses. The drugs were keeping the worst at bay, but she could still feel spectral pain at her side, and her head throbbed dully. Grateful for a few minutes of conscious, lucid time, she took the opportunity to just watch Loki sleep. The ends of his black hair were still ragged with the cut-by-a-blind-barber style, but his clothes were blood-free and tidy.

With sleep stripping away his sly facade, he looked sweetly innocent and vulnerable, which ironically reminded her of new suspicions. When she'd awoken briefly after surgery, in the delirium of anesthesia, she had asked and received, from Jane, a summary of the events following the portal's explosion. Although Darcy was certain that his haughty highness was moderately fond of her, she found it hard to believe he'd suffer the torture of Odin's spell a second time on her behalf. *What are you up to?*

The question brought up another memory of an overheard conversation a day or so later. She'd still been wrapped in the thick folds of anesthesia residue and painkillers, too weak to open her eyes.

Director Nick Fury's voice had broken the dark quiet of her half slumber. "You look like shit."

*Well, d'uh*, she thought, but the Director wasn't speaking to her.

"A fair improvement over dead," came Loki's voice, his velvety tone warmed by humor.

"That's debatable."

Loki laughed dryly. "Have I done something to upset you, Nick? Recently?"

"That's Director Fury, to you. And no, *Odinson*, you haven't. Because you're old news now."

"Truly? Then once Darcy is on her feet again, I shall endeavor to try harder."

"Uh-huh," said Fury. "Look at you, sitting here like her loyal dog. You're whipped, aren't you?"

"As an overworked carthorse." Apparently Loki understood that Midgard colloquialism, but he took Fury's jab at his manhood with easy humor. "What do you want, *Nick*? Ah, perhaps you're here to finally bring me the offered magazine."

Fury waited a beat before answering, probably giving Loki the evil eye in all senses of the term. "What's your game?"

"World of Warcraft, of course."

"I mean, with Ms. Lewis."

"Right," said Loki. "Together we shall conquer the Nine Realms." A pause. "Forgive the absence of maniacal laughter. I wouldn't want to wake my accomplice from her healing sleep."

"Somehow," said Fury, "I think you aren't joking."

Darcy had then dropped into sleep, a light smile on her lips, certain she could hear Loki's cryptic smirk.

Now, wide awake, more or less, she inspected the memory, finding the idea of conquering worlds with a supervillain both horrifying and minutely tempting. Her thoughts were interrupted when the door opened and a nurse entered the hospital room. What was her name? Ella.

"Welcome back, sleeping beauty," said Ella, sliding a brief, displeased glower in Loki's direction.

"Sleeping Beauty needed a kiss," said Darcy, intentionally not looking at her prince. "I'm doing awake all by myself."

"Good for you," said Ella, her smile white against skin almost as deep brown as Director Fury's. "You need anything?"

"I have to pee," said Darcy. "In there." She pointed weakly at the other door in the room, assuming it was a bathroom. "No more bedpans." She was stoned, but not enough to tolerate that indignity anymore.

Ella pursed her lips, taking in what Darcy hoped was the determined set of her chin. "All right, then." She unclipped the heart monitor from Darcy's finger, but the IV unfortunately, followed to the bathroom. Not that Darcy really wanted to be without her happy vein juice, anyway.

Loki snoozed on as Darcy and Ella made glacial progress toward the bathroom. "He always that

sound a sleeper?" Ella perused the sleeping immortal with cold curiosity, possibly wondering if this would be a good time to jab a scalpel into his heart.

"He's not a morning person," explained Darcy.

"Honey, I'm not even sure he's a person."

"Yes, he is," snapped Darcy, halting and glaring defiantly at the nurse. Normally, she didn't fly to Loki's defense, especially with SHIELD's staff who had more than enough reason for their anger and thirst for revenge. But Sean's vengeance against another Norse god had left her with a life-threatening hole in her side and a broken heart, and her own understanding of right, wrong and justice was too shattered to deal with the someone else's pain.

Ella, no doubt equipped with a backbone of steel, stared back but soon turned away from Darcy's unrelenting ferocity. "He's my friend," Darcy explained, because whatever else they meant to each other, that part was true. With a nod, Ella continued to help her toward the bathroom.

As she wobbled out again, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and stopped. Her long hair was a tangled and dirty mess of brown. The pretty streaks of colorful lowlights were gone. She sported two reddish purple lumps on her face, one on her chin, the other on her left cheek. The bump on her chin came with a bonus bloody scrape. All the white in her left eye had been swapped for blood red and there was a spray of broken vessels in the right.

"I'm royalty," she said. "Darcy, Queen of the Undead."

Humoring her, Ella said, "Well, your boyfriend's some kind of prince, right? Makes sense that you'd be a queen."

Her prince consort woke up just as she and Ella were approaching the bed. Sitting bolt upright, his eyes went to the bed, fleeting alarm on his face before he spotted her. He rose and helped get her back in bed. Ella gave him one last disapproving look and then left.

He sat on the edge of the bed, and took one of her hands in his, studying the pink flesh where Bic had burned her finger a few days before. Loki's default setting was scrawny, but today he was gaunt with aspirations for skeletal. The dark half circles under his eyes were so dark, they resembled the eye black that football players wore. In short, he looked a lot more like death than Loki, but perhaps because the IV drip had her more wasted than Keith Richards, he was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. Mostly because he had a pulse, and when she tightened her hand in his, the flesh and bone underneath had the distant tingle of magic, but in the normal, cinnamon-y way, and not threatening to rip apart in a chaos of out-of-control power.

"Where's Thor?" she asked.

"In a room down the hall. Jane's been staying in quarters here as well."

Because she was getting to be as bad as Jane, Darcy asked, "What about Inkblot? Bic? Did she...?"

"The guard...Pam? She's been going out and feeding the cat. Your reptile is in Jane's care." Amusement sparkled in his green eyes. "It followed Jane to the break room yesterday. A woman from another laboratory complained about the animal's presence in the building and soon after there was a small fire in her lab."

"Bic takes after you," said Darcy.

He smiled slyly. "Keep in mind, the beast doesn't act of its own accord. That bit of mischief was

Jane's doing."

"Jane? Jane Foster?" Even loaded on painkillers, Darcy couldn't make the idea of Jane the Arsonist work.

He nodded. "When the woman confronted Jane and accused her of this small crime, she said, 'Prove it,' and walked away."

Shaking her head at the idea of Jane being so feisty, she tapped a finger gently on his bandage. "How did that happen?"

He obviously knew she meant the bandage and not how he was injured. "When I was...incapacitated, Thor took advantage and demanded that a doctor set the bones. Fortunately, I awoke before they put needle and thread to my other injuries." He let go of her hand and started to pick apart the gauze and tape.

"Leave it alone," she said, swatting feebly at his hand, wires and IV tube assisting in the effort. "One more day, anyway." She didn't know why or how she knew, but somehow another day in the splints just seemed right.

The question had to be asked, so she did. "Odin's spell was for real, right, so why...?" She couldn't bring herself to finish the sentence.

"Why am I not 'Pushing up daisies'?"

"Or tumbleweeds." It was a halfhearted attempt at humor, since Loki's death didn't strike her as being very funny.

"Odin saved me, in a manner of speaking."

"The Odin?"

"No, Odin Martinez." Playful mirth sparkled in emerald green eyes. "You know? Short fellow? Brown hair? Lives in the blue stucco house in town?"

"Ha, ha." Wires and IV tube flapping, Darcy slapped him lightly on the arm. "*Odin*, seriously?"

"He turned the spell off briefly, before it killed me--entirely. I suspect my moth-, Frigga had a hand in the matter, but nonetheless, here I am."

"Totally Deus ex Machina," she observed. Loki's eyes narrowed slightly as he pondered what she meant. "Adopted or not, Frigga is your mom." She knew that statement would probably piss him off, but not only had he promised not to hurt her, but she was already so far beyond hurting, that what could he do anyway?

Two near-death experiences must have robbed him of the ability to glare malevolently, but the cool appraisal he swept over her was packed with mischief.

"Frigga's your mom." She dared him to do his worst with a tilt of her head and a raised eyebrow.

"Am I allowed at least to deny Odin?"

"Sure. He's an asshole."

His smile creased scratches and translucent bruises into interesting shapes. "With regard to things maternal, you may want to call your mother."



That gave her a jolt of surprise, enough to get past some of the chemistry in her system. "My mother?"

His expression positively angelic, he said, "She called, asking after you."

"Dude. You talked to my mother?" She inhaled deeply, thinking oxygen might help what he said make more sense. "She *called*?" This time, every year, her parents took a second honeymoon in Europe, and nothing, including their offspring, ever interrupted the trip.

"Yesterday evening." He pointed at the bedside phone with his eyes. "I answered. You were still in no condition to speak to anyone. When she asked who I was, I said, 'A friend.' She's rather astute as she then asked if that meant boyfriend."

"Does it?"

"I told her yes." He looked absurdly pleased with himself. "She asked my name and I told her."

Darcy slowly closed and opened her eyes. "You said your name was Loki."

Pressing his lips together, he shrugged. "It is my name and Mad Science may have disturbed her unnecessarily. She remarked that it was an odd name and went on to enquire on your health. SHIELD, it seems, told her that you had fallen off your bicycle and in a freak accident, been impaled on debris by the road."

"That's the official story, huh?"

He nodded. "I assured her that you had come through surgery well and your recovery was going even better."

"You--" At a loss for words, she ran her eyes over the form of the supernatural being who had become so ordinary to her over the course of a few months. She wasn't sure which concept was crazier: that the God of Mischief had chatted on the phone with her mom, or that her mother had bothered to remember that she had a daughter at all. The second, Darcy decided, because Loki, being Loki, was capable of anything.

Except self-sacrifice.

"What do you want?" she asked.

Loki's brow wrinkled with confusion, albeit with a twinkle of cunning in his eyes. "The throne of Asgard?" he tried.

"You let Odin's spell tear your magical self apart like confetti-- *for me*. Why? I don't have superpowers. All I have is great T&A and," she tapped her forehead, "more going on up here than people give me credit for. Why save me? What do you want, Loki?"

It may have been her imagination, but for a micro-second something like hurt widened his eyes. Then the cool mask smoothed his features. He rose abruptly and began to pace the short distance from one side of the room to the other, his skinny frame vibrating with a contradictory combination of anger and nervous energy.

"What I want?" he said, stopping near the foot of the bed. Shoulders rising as he drew himself up, he flicked fingers on his right hand and the distinctive snap-crackle-pop of dying electronic bugs followed. No alarms went off, so Fury must have recognized that Loki wouldn't go long without making magic, and put the system on silent mode in her hospital room.

Dropping his chin toward his chest, Loki stared at her hollow-eyed, the shadow of near-death plain on his face. "What I want is to take you by the shoulders and shake some miniscule measure of sense into you. What I want is to tell you that you are a stupid girl, even though I vowed never to say such a thing to you, because what else save abject idiocy would drive you to tamper with the elf's spell?"

"You," she said. "And Jane and Thor. I was trying to save everyone's bacon." She tried to cross her hands over her chest, but gave up when the heart monitor's wire tangled. "And I did."

The anger left his face and body in a rush and his lanky frame sagged as if ire was all that had kept him upright. "At what cost?"

"A big leaky hole in my side." She shrugged and offered a smile, which made her cheek ache. "But I'm okay now. Yay, science!"

He took one wobbly step back, then several others until the wall stopped his retreat. There he remained, obviously using the wall to stand and Darcy realized he was still pretty fucked up from his brushes with death. "I would have killed the elf for what he had done," he said, staring at the floor. "But had he not thrown up the shield, nothing, including science, could have saved you."

Blinking back the tears that suddenly glazed her vision, she nodded. "I know." Her vision broken into bright shards by tears, she saw Loki's approach as if through a kaleidoscope.

His large, graceful hand enveloped hers and he sat on the edge of the bed. "Do not weep for him, Darcy. I may owe him some perverse debt for protecting you, for doing what I didn't, but you...you paid him tenfold in friendship and he threw that kindness away."

"I'm so stupid," she said, struggling against the sobs that wanted to jerk through her chest.

His lips were soft on her mouth and softer still on her swollen, bruised cheek. "Then I love you for that stupidity." He drew back, clever fingers combing through the hair at her brow. "For without it, why else would you want me?"

"It helps that you're smokin' hot," she said to distract herself from his use of the "I" word.

He cocked his head at that, wry humor in his eyes. "And if you were not beautiful, I would not be here, making humiliating declarations of love." That word again. Her pulse quickened, announced embarrassingly by the monitor.

With a glance at the machine, he said, "You know I detest the word. It speaks of a sentiment just a breath removed from hate. It is misapplied to the fleeting rush of desire at the onset of a romantic relationship." The angles on his handsome face sharpened, and his voice developed an edge to match. "It describes *weakness*."

"Yet I, for all my reputed gifts of tongue, can find no better word to express this maddening power that seizes my heart and makes me complete in your presence, and undone in your absence." His hand tightened on hers and she could tell he stopped himself before he squeezed too hard. "That my heart should set itself on one such as you, so terribly young, is a betrayal and an aspect of myself still rages at the injustice of it."

He circled the tip of his thumb over the juncture where her thumb met her hand. "Days before, when you demanded my true face in recompense for my eventual leaving, I tried to tell you that I would not abandon you to this place. When I leave, and leave I shall, I would have you at my side, if that is what you wish."

Her heart swelling with emotion, all she could do was nod faintly.

"I still hold to the belief that I will be the end of you, but I concede, in some ways, you are stronger than me. You see me for what I am and offer me friendship." His forehead creased with confusion. "Try as I may, I cannot understand the motivation behind your actions. It seems to be neither kindness nor pity."

"You're over-thinking it, smarty pants," she said, sleepily, strong emotions warring with the painkillers. "I l-like you. A lot."

The confusion on his face deepened, his impervious mask cast aside. "Why?"

"Why?" she repeated and he nodded, his expression so honest that it tore at her heart. She wanted to say something eloquent and deep, but instead her reasons just came out in a babbling stream of consciousness. "Because...because on the outside you're all gorgeous, arrogant charm, but inside you're a total geek who loves books and magic and science. Because even though you're a fucked-up disaster, you sometimes let me in and I see the saner side of Loki. Because you're supposedly all about lies, but mostly you're brutally honest. Because all that honesty is usually awful, but sometimes it makes me laugh. Because you're never boring." She took a deep breath. "Because you tell me I'm smart."

"You are," he said.

Her speech had required more energy than she possessed and she yawned, and added smugly, "And because you need me."

At this, he composed his face in long haughty lines. "You presume much, girl."

"You hate it that I'm right."

"Yes, I do," he agreed, expression still arrogant. "I also hate it that the sight of you falling, your life's blood on my hands, threatened to take my sanity," his mouth twitched, "what little there remains of it."

The arrogance left his face, but he maintain the cool, regal bearing of a prince. "I would demand that you never do anything so foolish as to put your life in danger for me again, but I imagine that therein lies futility. So instead I will ask that you remember that I love you and that I cannot bear losing you."

Darcy tried to speak, but the right response just wouldn't pass her lips. Why was it so hard? This was what she wanted, wasn't it?

*Say it.*

*I can't.*

The words snagged deep in her chest, caught there by apprehension, the awareness of what he was. Even in this state of honesty, dressed in the impeccably tailored rich fabrics and soft leather, the stuff that cos-players dreamed of, utterly a creature of Asgard, he was a lie. Beneath the aristocratic features--high forehead and angular jaw made sharper by the severe sweep of black hair tight against his skull--lay another Loki. This deception not of his making, but one he hung onto like a miser with his last penny.

Both Lokis were beautiful, but Darcy knew that beautiful things came with a steep price. She met his gaze, trying to convey what she couldn't say and hide the indecision in her heart.

Her eyelids lowered and fluttered back open as exhaustion and drugs took over her body. "I...need you, too." With her remaining strength, she looked around the hospital room, and up at the many floors and steel and dirt that separated her from the surface, separated her from home. "So you'll stay? With me?"

"As long as you wish," he said, solemnly.

## Chapter 38

### CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

"The pigs mock you, my brother." Thor laughed and clapped Loki on the back.

Loki, seated on the couch and hunched over Jane's iPad, responded angrily, "I was robbed," although most of his ire was directed at Angry Birds.

Jane sat on the loveseat, studying research notes on a second iPad and watching *Legend of Korra* on the TV.

Darcy lurked in the shadows of the hallway, surreptitiously watching her roommates. Seeing them all sufficiently distracted, she snuck back down the hallway to the combination utility room and laundry. She stopped long enough to grab a few dog treats from the cabinet and then slipped out the trailer's side door.

Leaves made a papery crunch under her running shoes as she stepped onto the small landing outside the door. She blinked in the bright, late morning sunlight, eyes moving across the landscape to Loki's lair and the old cottonwood that stood hunched over the structure. The first hard freeze had borne down on the region a couple weeks ago, and the tree now stood gnarled, its limbs bare of leaves.

Starting down the three stairs, destination, Loki's lair, she stopped. A stick insect was walking slowly down one of the stairs' hand rails, wobbling on skinny legs, and Darcy did a double-take, surprised that it was still alive this late in November. She put a hand before the bug so that could it climb awkwardly onto the back of her hand. Lifting it to eye level, she turned her hand, but saw nothing to indicated the insect was anything out of the ordinary or magical. She carried the insect to a clump of sagebrush and left it there, where its pale gray green color provided perfect camouflage.

A hulking engine, at least four feet tall and just as wide, its dark metal poxed with orangey rust, sat a few feet from Loki's lair. A recent addition to Stark's collection of junk. Darcy eyed it as she passed, wondering if a string of Christmas lights might improve it. The shaded interior of the old plane cabin was chilly and Darcy shivered, knowing that soon running would be a better option than biking for keeping her thighs fabulous.

Out of reflex, she put a hand to her lower right side, wondering if she was up to biking, or running. For more than two months, she'd skipped her morning workout, because she was still healing, and also because everyone fluttered around her, discouraging her from exercise, treating her like a china doll that belonged in a locked curio cabinet.

*One way to find out.* She retrieved her bike, glad to see the tire pressure was still high-- the air pump was back in the house, with The Worry-Worts Three--and walked it to the road. A cool breeze slid over her, bringing the smell of burning piñon wood, probably from Mrs. Tapia's house. The old lady's only source of heat in her ancient trailer was a wood-burning stove, the wood trucked in once a month by her grandson.

Darcy swung her leg over the bike and paused, one foot on the lowest pedal. In the distance, the stucco walls around the Richards's property were golden in the sun. Going too far down the road in that direction meant passing *that place*. She hadn't had an attack of PTSD in a week, but just the thought of the destroyed barn made her hands slippery on the handlebars, and the creeping

sensation of hands tightening around her neck...

*Where am I?* she thought, repeating a variation on the question Loki always asked whenever she had a flashback--"Where are you, Darcy?" She pulled in a mouthful of air and said softly, "Don Tenorio Road. On my bike. There's Loki's lair, but his royal heinous is in the house. And there's Carlos Martinez-Yazzie's butt ugly tire wall. I'm going to see Meteor and Rocket."

Though her heart still raced, the thickening of blood in her head and the tight sensation of air blocked from her lungs eased. Using the small surge of adrenaline, she began to ride down the road.

*Nothing loves you like a dog that hasn't seen you, or at least, the treats you carry, in a while.* She slowed before the Richards's big iron gate. The two pit bulls set up a horrible yowling racket, canine grins splitting their broad, white faces from ear to ear.

"A lady never begs," Darcy advised. In response, Meteor put her front feet on Rocket's back, and tried to shove her blunt snout through the metal bars. "Yeah. You're right. Being a lady is totally overrated." Taking this to heart, the dogs inhaled each treat without any girly chewing. Once the jerky treats were gone, Darcy took a few minutes to give her furry fan club neck scratches. Her thoughts wandered to her "friends with benefits" relationship with her supervillain roommate. Specifically, the unhappy lack of benefits, lately.

She knew Loki's big romantic declaration in her hospital room was just a means of perking up the half-dead science assistant. Sort of like "Soft Kitty" for Sheldon Cooper, but with more sexy. What bothered her wasn't the insincerity of his words, but the possibility that he'd lost interest in her altogether.

"He's got it all wrong, doesn't he, ladies?" she said to the dogs. "Guys say, 'I love you,' to get more sex, not less."

Then again, Loki had been acting weird lately, period. He'd swapped his sullen teen aspect for puckish arrogance. Instead of ignoring the insignificant mortals, he now met their hostility with cocky condescension and snarky commentary.

The result was somewhere between adorable and horrifying. Of course, to Darcy, this Loki, with his ready sly smile and youthful enthusiasm for mischief was the kind of guy worth dropping all her I.Q. points for and falling stupid in love.

To all other mortals, this chipper Loki was the alien terrorist responsible for death and destruction on this little blue planet. But the guards and personnel at SHIELD were used to the old, grumpy Loki. They glared at him; he ignored them; which gave them a false sense of triumph. Now he met their angry stares with smug grins. Faced with the incomprehensible gaze of a being who'd been around for millennia, even the biggest, most bad-ass-ist soldiers found themselves squirming and turning away.

Not that Loki's new smirky charm had that effect on Darcy. Not that he even tried that crap with her, anyway. To be fair, she was still the only person he treated with any kind of respect. For Loki, he'd been downright helpful where she was concerned. No, he still didn't do housework, but throughout her recovery, he shadowed her steps, helping her get from place to place and sometimes lowering himself to fetch things for her--iPod, glasses, breakfast/dinner in bed.

He still slept in her bed--chastely, sigh, atop the covers--and when he crept back to his room at 2 AM, he took her with him, tucking her into Thor's old bed while he fiddled with his favorite project.

Darcy gave each dog one last scratch behind the ears, climbed on her bicycle and rode back toward home. Picking up speed as she approached the house, she zipped by as fast as possible, in case one of her minders noticed her absence and came out to stop her. About a half mile down the road, she slowed to a comfortable pace and pictured the round, metal contours of Loki's latest piece of mad science. Yes, she had figured out what that thing was. Naturally, when she'd asked him, he had smirked and told her it was, "A better mousetrap." But she knew the lie wasn't for her, but instead for whoever else might be listening. Because if he was building a way to break the bonds of brotherly love, he wasn't about to advertise it to SHIELD, or Papa Odin.

Another mile passed and she was nearly at the junction between paved road and the unpaved shortcut into Puente Antiguo. A black SUV loomed out of the road dust and slowed as it approached her. In her head, Darcy grimaced. Without the immediate threat of a murderer on the loose, she wasn't required to call for an escort. But she wondered if Jane and company had noticed her missing and called SHIELD. The vehicle stopped and so did she.

"Morning," said the driver, the same skinny, blond man who often was assigned the patrol down their road.

His partner, a generic white guy in his forties, nodded politely and said, "Getting back in shape?"

Borrowing a little of Loki's arrogance, she grinned. "This much awesome takes work."

"Good day for a ride," the guard replied, a genuine smile on his face. "Soon as we finish this shift, I'm going for a long run." The two guards and Darcy exchanged small talk for another minute, and then they said goodbye and drove off. Watching them go, she mused on the fact that while her relationship with Loki hadn't won her any friends, a few of SHIELD's personnel were a little friendlier lately.

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The first sign of change happened while she was still in the hospital. In just a few short days, her room smelled and looked like a florist's shop, colorful, and sweet. Darcy read the card from the latest arrival, a pot of cheerful daisies from Cherise in Human Resources. Cherise was a moon-faced redhead who usually had a smile on her face for everyone *except* Darcy and Jane.

In addition to her immortal babysitter, Jane was keeping her company this day. Thor was down the hall having some kind of Avengers-related confab with Director Fury, Natasha, and several other SHIELD agents. The topic, Loki told her, was probably "What to Do about Loki?" because that was always the topic. Darcy rolled her eyes and noted that not everything was about him. He had given her a faux wounded expression for that.

Darcy's gaze swept the array of flowers. "I don't get it." A lump grew in her throat. She held up Cherise's card. "These are the same people who called me Loki's whore behind my back." And sometimes to her front.

Loki, who'd been snooping through the flower forest, gave her a sharp glance and then glared at the unfortunate foliage as if it were responsible for besmirching her honor. Dark plans roiled in his green eyes, but any vengeful mischief was interrupted by the two fat tears that rolled down Darcy's cheeks.

He came right over and sat on the edge of the bed. His hands were warm on her skin as he lifted her face toward his, meeting her eyes, enveloping her in his infinitely ancient gaze. What freaked other people out, felt like home to her.

His silence was a comfort, but it was Jane, however, who went the Silvertongue route and said the right thing. She approached the bed, halting, her brown eyes thoughtful. "It's because Sean betrayed them too. They're as confused and hurt as you are." Jane's gaze shifted slightly to Loki. "I think they realize that you can't always tell who is good or bad, or understand what's going on in someone else's head."

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Darcy stood on the bicycle pedals for extra oomph as she started through the slippery sand on the road. A thin cloud of dust still hung in the air and she wondered if sand caused lung cancer. That would be pretty pathetic. Survive being impaled by a metal spear, only to die on account of eeny-whensy particles of silica.

With a last glance back at the black SUV receding into the distance, she continued up the road. A significant contingent of SHIELD employees still thought she was the devil's handmaiden (and ignored the fact that she was also Thor's, an Avenger's, friend), but she'd picked up a new friend--Pam, the guard.

Pam, like Natasha, was one of the few who didn't quail under Loki's smirking stare. She didn't like him, but she didn't waste energy on stupid posturing. Instead, she acknowledged him with a disinterest nod, which surprisingly, he'd sometimes return.

Last week, Pam, Darcy and Jane had made the trek to Albuquerque where they loaded up on supplies and had lunch with Pam's girlfriend, Eileen. And now Darcy no longer had to face the angry glares of Sarah and Cammie alone when she went up to the break room.

It was great to have another girl buddy, but she shared a unique and sad truth with Pam--they both carried death with them. Pam's on the battlefield; Darcy's in a charred barn in the New Mexico desert.

So far, Pam had not asked her about the events of that day. Probably she knew it was too soon. But it was a comfort knowing that she understood the weight Darcy held in her heart.

Darcy was certain of one thing, however. Despite the guilt she carried, she would do it again. Only with any do-over, she'd have the smarts not to stand in front of the exploding portal.

The first day back at work was the worst. Darcy had gone from simply being Loki's booty call to the central figure in the story of the well-liked accountant who was actually a bloodthirsty elf. Whispers of speculation followed where ever she went, reactions ranging from awe to suspicion, and she almost missed the days when everyone hated her with a uniform loathing.

But when she stepped into the break room, a strange sense of confidence fell upon her. After all that had happened, the dirty looks from Sarah and Cammie didn't matter. Well, they did, a little. The Darcy who walked across that room, however, felt transformed, made privy to some secret information and stronger for it. She'd been to murky borderlands where knives of betrayal had tried to slice away her faith in everything, and she parried their sharp blades and emerged into new country, fractured but not shattered.

Panning a long, bold look around the room, she felt her irreverent armor starting to morph into something braver, more authentically Darcy. She picked a table in the center of the room, the spot everyone else instinctively avoided and waited for Pam.

On their second lunch, Pam had asked her, "Are you and Loki...dating?"



Darcy smiled faintly as Pam fumbled over the word "dating." "What do you think?" she replied with a touch of bitterness in her tone.

"Before the day you got hurt, I had never seen you two together. I'm a firm believer in coming to my own conclusion based on what my eyes see, so I didn't pay much attention to the rumors."

"Yeah," said Darcy, "like the one that says SHIELD knew in advance that Thor would come crawling back to Earth with Loki." Sean had told her about this rumor and she had filled it away, far from her conscious thoughts, along with every other negative thing in her life. "And that SHIELD kept me around to be Loki's easy lay. Because, hey, Darcy doesn't know shit about science or anything else, but she's got a great rack. What else is she good for?" Hurt and anger rose in her chest and for the first time she didn't see any reason to hide it.

Pam nodded. "I heard that one. If it helps, I didn't buy it."

"But?" prodded Darcy.

"No buts, not really." She smiled reassuringly at Darcy. "After Thor brought you in, he hurried off to try to save his brother from the magic that ties them together. He came back about a half hour later, with Loki and Jane. They were worried about you, but once Loki woke up, he started demanding to see you. When he didn't get his way, he got belligerent, started throwing around all kinds of nasty threats."

"My prince charming." Darcy lifted her straw from the tea and stabbed at the ice with the tip. "Sorry." His rotten behavior wasn't her responsibility, but she felt a need to apologize.

The guard chuckled. "Actually, none of us took him too seriously. He couldn't stand without Thor's help. He looked like Dracula and was coughing up blood and shaking like a junkie." She grimaced. "Later, he switched tactics and started playing nice. That was worse than shithead Loki."

Remembering the charm he'd heaped on Ruth King, Darcy nodded. "Something must have worked. He ended up in my room, eventually."

"Director Fury let him see you pretty soon after you got out of surgery. Even before the doctors okayed it. After that, he wouldn't leave your side." Pam gave Darcy a meaningful look. "That's when I figured something was going on between you two."

"We slept together for the first time about a week before..." *before I killed Sean*, "before I got hurt." She met Pam's blue eyes. "But at first, when he moved into the trailer, all we did was fight. Even then, we kind of liked each other, but we weren't friends. Even when we moved into the friend zone, there weren't any benefits, not right away."

"Loki and I used to bicker so much that Agent Romanoff thought he was going to kill me. So if there was some big conspiracy on SHIELD's part to hook me up with Loki, no one told her." She said this last part a little louder for the benefit of the haters in the vicinity.

Pam nodded, accepting. "What do you see in him? Is there something that the rest of us don't see?"

Darcy shook her head. "Not really," she admitted. "I like him, even when he's being a shithead." He had shown her another side, the kinder, goofier version, but that belonged to her and her alone. Besides, she knew it was futile to try and justify what she felt for Loki. Ultimately, Loki's redemption, if there was to be one, would be between him and the people he wronged.

"You think there's good in him?"

Her grasp tightened on the straw, and thin plastic gave way under her fingers. "I believe there's good in everybody." She caught Pam's eyes and held her gaze. "I also believe there's evil in everybody, and that," she jabbed at the ice with the straw again, "is the part most people don't want to admit about themselves."

The ex-soldier's mouth thinned in contradiction before reluctant agreement softened her expression. "Yeah, I guess you've got that right."

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It wasn't like Loki had blown her off. If anything, they were even closer after the incident at the barn. Their banter was still witty and sharp as knives, but he was falling into the habit of telling her more about his past in Asgard, even though the topic still could make him go from cheerful to furious in under five seconds.

He never turned that anger on her, though. The only time he'd ever been particularly harsh was when she recently tried to get into his pants. He'd snarled a "No!" at her. Darcy, being a firm believer in the idea that "no" meant "no," had sighed and let the matter go.

Or at least her grabby fingers let it go. Her imagination, aided and abetted by her reawakened libido, however, had started stripping him naked and happily molesting him on a daily basis. His shift in demeanor wasn't helping, either. Every time he tossed a wry rejoinder at someone, cracking with impish humor, her hormones went into overdrive and she could hardly keep from pouncing like a lion on a hapless gazelle.

Her desire for him was totally at odds with what had happened to her. Sean's attack had dredged up her old issues with body autonomy, and sometimes even casual touch from Jane made her flinch.

Loki, with his terrible strength should have been the last person whose touch she could tolerate. Her body, though, remembered how even when he took her with unrelenting ferocity, all that fearsome power was utterly within her control. And after everything she'd been through, she craved the life-affirming rhythm of two bodies moving together.

The bicycle's tires shimmied in a puddle of deep sand and Darcy returned to the present to put her thighs to use and dig herself out of the road hazard. Her legs were still strong after the exercise hiatus, but she felt a faint pull along her side, in the place where new muscle and skin were just a little thinner than the rest.

She slowed and turned for home. If she hurt herself, Jane and the rest would never let her out of the house again. Although, being trapped in the house wouldn't be a bad deal if Loki was willing play naughty jailer to her prisoner.

Once she returned to paved road, she pressed a hand against the healed hole in her side, feeling no pain. Her injury couldn't have been the only reason Loki avoided getting conjugal with her. Aside from some inadvertent groping as he played the part of gorgeous body servant, he hadn't touched her in anything other than a platonic manner since she'd been incapacitated by her injury, not even after she had healed.

And with a couple of exceptions, they hadn't talked about their relationship, or anything romantic.

First, there was her embarrassing joke about his last name.

It was a Thursday and Jane had dragged Darcy (literally--there had been kicking and screaming) to her monthly meeting with the other laboratories' head honchos. Returning to the lab, Darcy flopped

in her chair and scooted it across the room to Loki, who was scrolling through a website for stock market day traders.

She waved a yellow notepad in his face, the top page filled with a mixture of notes from the meeting and little hearts impaled with knives. "Which is it? Odinson or Laufeyson? What should I doodle when I'm suppose to be paying attention to Jane. 'Darcy Odinson or Laufeyson'?"

Instantly, her eyes grew wide at her mistake and she wanted to snatch the words out of the air. To most guys, that kind of comment, even in jest, was like verbal mace. She started to tell him that Lewis was a perfectly good last name and that she had no interest in being anyone's bride, but he spoke first.

"Perhaps...Darcy Lokisfriend?" His tone was amused, both eyebrows lifted slightly.

Then and now, the response filled her with an immediate warmth. Unlike "I love you," which, along with that dazzling smile, no doubt won him all-access passes to the beds of Asgard's finest ladies, "friend" probably wasn't a word the trickster used much, and definitely not without an ulterior motive. Except, as everyone knew, friendship with a barely respected science assistant didn't offer him any advantage.

But, the cool factor of being Loki's buddy was diminished by the possibility that his comment was a polite way of stating that she was now trapped in the friend zone, with no chance for sex on the horizon.

As for love? Well, the word had been banished from both their vocabularies. Darcy avoided applying it to even mundane stuff. "I lu-really, really, *like* chocolate."

The l-word made one appearance, uttered by him, a couple weeks ago. Loki and Darcy were sitting on the porch steps, soaking up the late afternoon sun along with Bic, who was perched on a nearby railing.

Thor, who might better be known as the god of lost causes, was once again trying to teach Jane how to throw and catch a football. Actually, Jane was making some progress, and had caught the ball about five times out of ten. Darcy slid a look at Loki, Thor's favorite lost cause. She went through the habitual process of reminding herself that he was Loki--unstable, inhuman, and inclined to destroy small towns and large cities--but got distracted by the way the sun honed the sharp angles of his cheekbones, and the blue-black glints in his hair. She sighed and thought, *Wading pools are less shallow than me.*

"Any reason you stare?" he said, watching Jane and Thor.

"You're pretty. Like a butterfly." She offered him a big smile with lots of teeth.

He gave her a look that would have melted rock, but Darcy was better than asbestos where his glares were concerned. His gaze settled on her mouth and she hoped he was about to kiss her. Instead, he said, "She does not love him, you know."

"Huh?"

"Yes!" said Jane as she caught another pass. Darcy studied her and Thor.

"Bullshit," said Darcy. "She totally loves him."

Loki cocked his head at her, his expression saying that she was missing something in his words. "Does she?"

"She, uh..." Her voice faded as she noticed something in his eyes, a deeper question, maybe. It spread from his eyes outward across the stark lines of his face and then, abruptly, was replaced with the usual devilish smirk.

Turning, she studied Jane's face, but not really seeing it. She ran her tongue over her teeth and gave him the only answer she could. "I don't know."

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The black SUV passed her again, heading back to headquarters, she assumed. *What's the point?* Did SHIELD think they'd catch Loki sitting on the front porch, wearing that crazy, gold, goat helmet, cackling gleefully while building an army out of duct tape, chewing gum, and spare junk from Stark's collection?

The two guards again waved cheerfully. As she returned the wave, a dense knot of melancholy formed in her stomach. Had they known Sean? Did they think she was some kind of hero for what she did in the barn?

Was that their definition of a hero? Someone who kills someone else? By that definition, Loki should have been heroic in their eyes. Not for the horror he unleashed recently, but for the centuries of bloodshed he aided and abetted with Thor in the service of Asgard's great and noble causes.

*One man's noble cause is another's travesty*, she thought, unhappily, Sean's face vivid in her memory. If she had known what he was, could she have stopped him? Sucking in a gulp of air, she accelerated for one last sprint, her legs driven by the powerful conviction that she would have tried.

If she could live with what Loki was, believe that the trickster could be more than a dangerous maniac, then she would have thought the same of Sean. Except he had never given her a chance.

Then again, neither had Loki. Not exactly. Fate had dumped him in her living room and her weakness for tall, dark and sinister had compelled her to poke at him when she should have packed her things and moved to New York.

Her fascination, however, went beyond his looks. She liked him, the complexity and challenge of a mind that operated outside the constraints of mortality and old age. From the first time she set eyes on him, she'd been drawn to him, and when she approached, she'd felt a comfortable click of two people fitting together.

Was it magic? Had he put a spell on her, as Erik believed? If so, there wasn't much un-magical Darcy could do about it. She gave a little shrug and a smirk. *Fine. I can deal*. If Loki had gone to the trouble of magicking her into his sidekick, then she'd be that and *waaay* more.

She couldn't keep Sean from his darker impulses, could not push him to be more than a creature of hate and vengeance, because she didn't know what Sean was. But she knew Loki.

The God of Mischief could never be a saint, a hero in the Thor-ish sense, because the focal point of any epic is a man (or occasionally, a woman) who dispenses justice with muscle and easy violence. In her head, Darcy shrugged miserably. It was horribly easy, taking a life. She'd done it without even trying.

A trickster's job was much harder, relying on back room deals, fluid slight of hand, and extraordinary cunning to remake the world. This, she knew, was why his recent, big bombastic schemes failed. Overt violence just wasn't his thing.

But acclaim was. If Darcy was going to keep him on track, turn his powers of persuasion and magic to a neutral orientation (outright "good" being relative), she'd have to find a way to get him the recognition he craved. This was her mission.

Her legs began to throb with her fast pace, but that was eclipsed by the burn of a sense of purpose. The sun hit her glasses at the perfect angle, slicing the familiar shapes of the house and Loki's lair with bright rays. She pedaled harder, a smug smile on her face.

## Chapter 39

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

*"Te amo como se aman ciertas cosa oscuras, secretamente, entre la sombra y el alma. (I love you as certain dark things are to be loved, in secret, between the shadow and the soul.)"* ~Sonet XVII,  
Pablo Neruda

When Darcy returned, she found Loki waiting in the airplane cabin's threshold. The sight of him startled her so much that her fingers clenched the front brake too hard and the bike skidded and bucked in the sand, nearly throwing her. She wobbled, but got her feet under her, then shut her mouth, which gaped open at his garb.

He leaned against the side of the cabin, arms crossed, stony gaze on her; he wore *that* armor--green, black and gold, leather, heavy cloth and metal, the tall horned helm--the stuff of world domination and madness. Refusing to be cowed, she swung her left leg over the bike and walked to him.

"Move it, Mad Science." To her surprise, he shifted to the side, allowing her room to pass with her bicycle. After stowing the bike, she took off her helmet, and paused a few rows behind him. Her eyes traced the line made by the long surcoat from his shoulders, tapering down to his slim waist and starting the sweep down his long legs. Even dressed in this glorified cosplay costume, topped in the ludicrous, overblown helmet, and slumped against the inside edge of an old airplane cabin, he was a thing of delicious grace. She wanted so much to wrap her arms around his waist and press herself against the elegant strength of his back.

Instead, she joined him at the entry, staring out at the gorgeous New Mexico sunset. The sky's colors, purple and pinks, shifted the colors of his armor, muting the green and softening the black. She could see the patterns of clouds in the shiny helm.

"Why the armor? Planning to rule the ants again?"

"I wondered if it still fit. Perhaps too much ice cream..."

"You're immune to calories." She appraised him. "As for the armor, two words: 'dry cleaners.'" His time in Odin's prison was chronicled in crusted bloodstains, splattered liberally on every inch of the armor. "Especially if you're going to try the supervillain thing again."

"The bloodstains demonstrate my commitment to the matter of villainy."

"Need to be committed, more like," she muttered. Meeting his eyes, she expected him to be scowling. Instead he smiled, a real version of the expression with white, perfect teeth, echoed in little wrinkles at corners of his eyes. She felt herself go weightless as butterflies flew in her stomach. Her brain lurched over the anachronism of the cute boyish smile, framed by the menacing helm and bloodied armor.

A breeze whistled over the plane's metal edges and she got a sweet scent of fabric softener; Jane's laundry. Knowing Jane, it might included Thor's undies and such. Darcy frowned and eyed Loki's filthy armor. He had better not think that sidekick duty came with laundry service. He had opposable thumbs and magic; he could wash his own supervillain underoos. What *did* he think?

"Big horns," she observed wryly. "Good thing I've seen you naked. Otherwise, I'd think you were compensating for something."

His smile faded and he turned toward the sky's colorful drama.

"O-kay." She sighed. "So seeing me almost bleed to death reminded you I was a feeble mortal and now you're totally turned off."

Though his head was only slightly turned from her, the damned helm hid his expression. "The first part of your statement is true," he said. She felt something break inside her. "I had developed an odd complacency about your mortality. Sometimes I even forgot what you were."

Her fingers twisted on the chin straps and she looked down at her bicycle helmet, blinking rapidly. She swung it back and forth and let it go, watching it arc through the air and land behind her on a seat.

She felt a movement of air and when she looked up, he was next to her. He took her hands, turning her to him. "My feelings for you have not changed. I love you, Darcy Lewis." She bit her lip, still expecting the worse. "As for what you are...there are solutions. You wouldn't be the first mortal to become something more." He smiled, a brief show of teeth. "Achieving that end will involve some mischief on my part, but it can be done."

Bending to her, he said, "The question is whether this is a path you wish to follow." His gaze grew distant. "For in what you might gain, there will be much loss."

Loss. A year or so ago she would have shrugged off his comment. Inured to the pains of the past by her flippancy, she wouldn't have been able to imagine what he meant. Now, Sean's absence throbbed, an ache that no painkiller could ease. It wasn't just the betrayal, but the gaping hole left where his friendship and presence had been ripped from her life. Her fingers clenched Loki's, the pulse of life strong in his flesh, and she remembered what it was like to see him lifeless. Then there were the smaller wounds left by Andy and Max.

What he offered was the chance to pull herself out of the normal cycle, to stand back and watch as the years took everyone she loved here on Earth. She looked into his vivid green eyes and saw the ravages of what an abnormally long life wrought; millennia of pain, jealousy, and loss on a framework that was all too human.

But in his face, she also saw someone she knew more than seemed possible; her heart sang in recognition, and the idea overwhelmed her. Twisting her hands gently, she freed herself from his grip and took a step back.

Hurt slipped past his careful facade, and for a moment he looked lost. Darcy felt a twinge of guilt and also a sense of wonder that she could see through him so easily. She remembered when her mother, in a rare instant of frustration with her father, had told her, "All men are just big boys." Still, Loki shouldn't have been that transparent; he had been practicing hiding his emotions for centuries.

The implications of her ability to read him, the bond between them, were too much and she took another step back, like a puppy straining at an unfamiliar leash. No, that wasn't quite right. Because if she pulled too hard, he'd let her go. Maybe he had learned a thing or two from his failed attempt at tyranny, but she knew he would not hold her there, even though parting might break them both.

She could walk away; it was probably the smart thing to do. Life would go on and it probably would be a good, though much shorter, life. But his memory would always be there, like the scar

on her side, a reminder of the road not taken.

"Loki, I..." He stood motionless, a tall menacing presence with sad confusion on his thin face, and she reached her hands to him. Without hesitation, he moved forward and took them, his grip almost too strong.

Her lips parted, but the words stopped in her throat.

*Spit it out. Speak.*

*I can't.*

*Just say it.*

*I can't.*

*Say. It.*

His preternaturally strong fingers tightened on hers, as if he felt her struggle and tried to lend her strength. Why did this have to be so difficult? She'd said the words before, to some silly boy, years ago. *It's hard because you really mean it this time.*

The knot loosened briefly in her throat and she spoke before it could come back. "I love you, Loki."

Those four words cut her heart like a scalpel, incising a tidy nick from which a brightness welled and flowed toward him. She swayed, unsteady, feeling a link forming between them, liquid, flexible, but strong. The urge to run still lurked under her skin, but she leaned into his hands, knowing that if she broke away now, she'd shatter.

"Love doesn't always make sense, does it?" She didn't wait for an answer; the question was rhetorical. "But this does. Even though you're a huge pain in the ass and I'm, me; this is what should happen. You, me, and whatever the universe throws at us." She pulled a face. "Which, knowing you, will be a lot like monkey shit, but bigger."

"On several orders of magnitude," he agreed.

"I had it all worked out," she said. "You'd move in and I'd hate you." He smirked at that. "And then Thor hauled you through the door, I took one look at you, and couldn't do it. It wasn't because you were gorgeous, because, ugh, you looked like a zombie who'd been put in a blender. It was because..." *You were lost and it was my job to find you.* Truth she knew better than to speak.

She appraised him dispassionately. Back in the hospital, when he had wandered off with Thor for dinner one evening, she had finally done some snooping in SHIELD's records of the attack on New York. She thought she was prepared for what the images held, but who would be? How do you reconcile the man you love with the monster? Her gaze moved over his face, superimposing the cruel mask from the images over the calm and much friendlier visage before her and confusion wracked her mind.

But when she closed her eyes, she heard his voice as he read to her in the hospital. Novels, newspapers, dirty limericks from Asgard, even celebrity gossip from the Internet. No one had read to her since she was a child, and with that simple gesture he made it impossible for her not to love him, impossible not to believe that he could be something far better.

"Because I've always known you," she told him even though spoken out loud, it sounded a little



ridiculous.

He nodded, his eyes moving off her face, bitterness pulling the skin tight on his. "Yet I need you more than you, me," he said.

She shook her head. "Nah, it's not the simple, Loki. If I lost you, if you took off tomorrow, I would go on, but only because I'm mortal." For now, anyway, how weird was that? "I'd only have a few decades and I couldn't waste them being broken."

"Broken," he repeated and closed his eyes and their positions reversed with him leaning into her hands.

"We're going to fight, a lot, you know," she said.

He opened his eyes. "Our disagreements will be the stuff of Thor's tales."

"But our make-up sex will be blazing hot."

Rather than a snappy comeback, he lavished her with a smoldering look up and down her body.

Darcy gulped, hormones starting to wash away her ability to think. "Your enemies are going to use me to get to you."

"Yes, they will try," he responded, demeanor vibrant with a thousand schemes.

She ran her tongue over her front teeth slowly, enjoying the way the action made his eyes glaze over briefly. "And you plan to use that to your advantage."

"I'm Loki."

She absorbed this and then countered with, "We are going to use it to our advantage." Releasing his hands, she poked a finger against his chest, fingernail tapping metal. "*We*."

"There is no 'we' in Loki, only an 'I.'"

"Cute." She skated her tongue over her teeth again, a little slower this time. "But wrong."

Humor gave way to icy menace and he glowered down at her. "I could lock you away on some isolated outpost in a forgotten corner of a yet-discovered realm--"

"Where I'd still get into trouble," she pointed out helpfully.

His shoulders slumped, flat resignation dimming his eyes. "I know." She gave him her a sultry smile and ran her eyes over his clothing, working out what strap went where and what buckle connected to what.

Her gesture had the intended effect, because he pulled his gaze away, looking over her head, clearly trying to keep his composure. A second later, smugness returned to face and he grinned down at her. "We, indeed." He snatched at her hand and pulled her to him. "Which means you must also apprise me of *your* schemes, particularly those that might get you killed."

She lean into him, her breasts against his body. "I was flying by the seat of my pants. No time to send out memos."

"There is always time."

"Nuh-uh. Not for a mortal, which I still am."

His smile faded somewhat and he took her face in his hands, green eyes meeting blue. Darcy could feel her body reacting to his proximity, the smell of leather and metal, his considerable height. "Then we should make much of the time we have," he said, huskily, an odd touch of vulnerability and sadness in his green eyes. He kissed her and she pressed herself against him, hard armor digging into her breasts, the helm's cheek guards cool against her face.

Somewhere in the back of her mind came the realization that she was snogging Loki--Loki, destroyer of cities and all around big bad--in the remains of an airplane, in full sight of everyone. An image of the God of Mischief, tall and menacing in full armor, kissing a much shorter, mortal woman in bicycle shorts and a Lady Lobos sweatshirt, popped in her mind and she giggled into his mouth.

"What?" he asked.

Wriggling free of his grasp, she reached to his shoulders, closed her fingers around layers of metal and leather, ignoring the bloodstains and began to drag him back into the confines of the cabin.

"We really need to get you out of that armor."

## **THE END**

### Chapter End Notes

"...never knowing how to talk about what I do. If I could talk about it, I would not have to do it. I make art, sometimes I make true art, and sometimes it fills the empty places in my life. " ~from *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* by Neil Gaiman

Thank you to my intrepid readers for reading this far. And oh, boy, was it far! What this story wouldn't do for a ferocious editor who would "kill my darlings," as Stephen King might say. This version, on this archive, will, I hope, have a few less typos, homonym errors, and other crimes against the English language than other versions. But because I'm my own worst copy editor, it'll still be an object lesson in what not to do in fiction.

This ended up being an exercise in confidence building, because, before Darcy and Loki climbed into my skull and started yapping at each other, I'd given up entirely on writing. A decision that was sort of breaking my heart, but which made perfect sense. I'd realized I was the suckiest writer in the history of vacuum cleaners and therefore hadn't written anything more than a grocery list in years. While I don't have any delusions about being particularly good, it's nice to know I'm capable of spinning a yarn that gets a few readers' attention.

At this point, I don't have any immediate plans to write the next chapter in Loki and Darcy's story. Primarily because while they still chatter at me, nothing resembling a coherent plot has emerged from the noise. I see the two of them having many adventures, a couple of kids (who have both their parents best and worst qualities), and after many centuries, they'll cause the Ragnarok and go out together in a blaze of glory. Because nothing lasts forever. Or does it?

On the other archive (FF), I wrote a long afterward on the how and whys of my characterization and plot choices in A Morbid Taste for Ice. But in the interest of out-of-character brevity, I'll just get to the important stuff. Namely, my playlist, because music rules my world.

Thanks again for reading, commenting, and leaving kudos!

#### Playlist for A Morbid Taste for Ice

Sean:

"Hymn for the Missing," Red  
"Heron Blue," Sun Kil Moon  
"Louder Than Words," Les Friction  
"World on Fire," Les Friction  
"Doomsday," Globus  
"In the Air Tonight," Phil Collins  
"I Am Stretched on Your Grave," Abney Park  
"The Hanging Tree," The Hunger Games, Mockingjay Pt. 1

Loki:

"Wrong Side of Heaven," Five Finger Death Punch  
"Far from Home," Five Finger Death Punch  
"Remember Everything," Five Finger Death Punch  
"Oceans," Evanescence  
"Snuff," Slipknot  
"Monster You Made," Pop Evil  
"Tired," Stone Sour  
"Hurricane," 30 Seconds to Mars  
"I Don't Know What Love Is," Leslie Nuchow  
"Remember the Tin Man," Tracy Chapman  
"Prayer in Open D," Emmy Lou Harris  
"Stray Italian Greyhound," Vienna Teng

Darcy:

"Judas," Lady Gaga  
"I'm Not That Girl," Wicked the Musical  
"1,000 Ships," Rachel Platten  
"Extreme," Valora  
"Bulletproof," Kerli  
"Devil's Backbone," The Civil Wars  
"Fight Like a Girl," Emilie Autumn  
"Girl in the War," Josh Ritter  
"Skyscraper," Demi Lovato  
"I Don't Want to Be a Bride," Vanessa Carlton  
"Brave," Sara Bareilles  
"Listen to Your Heart," Roxette

Darcy/Loki:

"The Only Fault," Rachael Yamagata  
"Love the Way You Lie," Skylar Grey  
"Before the Sun," Shannon Curtis

"Break In," Halestorm  
"The Last Night of the World," Miss Saigon, The Musical  
"They Weren't There," Missy Higgins  
"Dust to Dust," The Civil Wars  
"My Beloved Monster," Eels  
"A Thousand Years," Christina Perri  
"It is You (I Have Loved)," Dana Glover  
"Safe & Sound," Taylor Swift

Thor/Loki:

"What Have You Done," Within Temptation  
"Too Late," Fisher  
"Save Your Life," Les Friction  
"War," Poets of the Fall

Thor:

"Wars," Hurt

Closing Credits:

"And We Run," Within Temptation

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